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HIS COUSIN ADAIR

“Time but the impression stronger makes,
As streams their channels deeper wear.”

HIS COUSIN ADAIR

BY

GORDON ROY

AUTHOR OF

'FOR HER SAKE,' 'FOR BETTER FOR WORSE'

IN THREE VOLUMES

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B O O K II.

(CONTINUED)

HIS COUSIN ADAIR.

CHAPTER V.

A FEW days later, Adair, to all appearance once more "the young lady at large" of whom she had laughingly spoken, was sitting in her aunt's rather dull little drawing-room. Mentally she had uncompromisingly pronounced the house "a stuffy hole," being altogether unaccustomed to the ordinary small London house in an expensive neighbourhood. After the great bare hospital wards with their superabundance of light and air, she felt as if she could hardly breathe or move about in the small overcrowded rooms (as they seemed

to her), with their many muffling draperies. She had always associated her aunt's stately figure with the great rooms at Earlshope, and the contrast made her present abode appear pitifully small.

"My taste is hopelessly spoiled," Adair said with a laugh. "I look at everything from a sanitary point of view instead of an æsthetic. If people only knew it, the prophet's chamber, with its bed and its stool and its candlestick, was quite a model one. I don't know what they want with such a wilderness of little tables covered with breakables, and so many curtains to shut out the good light. There is little enough of it, I am sure." Mrs Earlstoun laughed at her zeal in opening windows and pushing back the offending curtains.

It had cost Adair a hard struggle to give up her work at the hospital, but that was the least part of the sacrifice. At Mrs Earlstoun's every old association would be renewed again. Had she strength enough for it? In plain words, would she be able to meet Douglas again as if they had never been anything

more to each other than cousins,—to meet him as if she had never opened all her heart to him ; as if that early morning hour on the bridge, that parting under the gathering clouds on the Misty Law, had never been ? A question that it was not easy to answer. She had not been able, after her return to London, to fulfil her intention of seeing Mrs Earlstoun. Week after week had passed away, until, some time after her youngest cousin Clara's marriage, she had received a pitiful little letter from her aunt, asking if she would not at least come to see her ; she was a lonely, suffering, sometimes she thought a dying woman, she wrote. Such an appeal from one usually so proudly self-contained had touched Adair's warm heart to the quick. She had gone, and that visit had decided the matter. That Mrs Earlstoun was ill, seriously ill, Adair saw at once ; that she had much suffering before her, she feared : and when at parting her aunt had clung to her, begged her not to leave her—if she could nurse strangers, would she not come and care for her ?—Adair could resist no longer. Come

what might, she would stay. Agnes, who had lately settled at Queen's Gate for the season, and was preparing for her triumphant entry into society, was exceedingly wroth over what she called this last freak of Adair's. "To tell people that your sister has taken up nursing is something definite, at least, and so many people take up fads of that sort that there is nothing strange about it," she complained; "but to go to be nurse, or companion, or lady-help, or upper servant, or goodness knows what, to Aunt Evelyn——!" Words failed little Mrs Mitchell to express her disgust and indignation. Adair had grown accustomed, however, to finding herself placed in a sort of chronic opposition to her mother and sister. If they were annoyed, she was very sorry certainly, but she could not make their ideas her standard, nor run herself and her life into the mould they had prepared for her. "I shall not insist on claiming kinship with you, if you like," she had said at last with a laugh, after listening to Agnes's tirades on her "anomalous position," and trying in vain to

pacify the little lady, who, in the first dignity of wealthy matronhood, was very willing to tutor and patronise her unwedded sister.

The little bustle of settling down into her new abode over, and Mrs Earlstoun gone to rest for an hour, Adair sat down in the empty drawing-room, a sensation of utter blankness coming over her. What was she to do next? Was this she sitting unoccupied in the middle of the afternoon in this dim, cool, flower-scented room, instead of her attention being claimed by a dozen voices, a dozen duties at once? The house was very quiet; there was no sound but the distant roll of wheels in Piccadilly, with now and then a louder rumble, a sharp trot, a sudden jar, as some carriage dashed up the narrow street and stopped at some door. The sun was blazing on the striped blinds and awnings of the opposite houses, but this side of the street was in shadow. Through the widely opened windows, mingling with the scent of the mignonnette in the flower-boxes, came that smell of mingled dust and freshness so

suggestive of hot weather and high summer to all town-bred nostrils, the smell of newly watered streets and pavements. The distant sounds, so even and monotonous for the most part, the sudden change from active exhausting work of mind and body, had lulled Adair into a sort of dreamlike state. She was lying back in her chair, scarcely even consciously thinking, when the door opened behind her. She looked round as a tall broad-shouldered man came in, in the leisurely fashion of one who is very much at home. In the subdued light she looked at him for a second in doubt, before she recognised her cousin Douglas. He started violently, and stood still for a moment on seeing her, and then came up and shook hands, saying—

“It is really you, Cousin Adair? I heard that you were coming, but I did not expect to see you quite so soon. It was awfully good of you to come. I don’t know how we are to thank you: it is just like yourself,—can I say anything more than that?” with an attempt at a smile. He spoke quietly

enough, but with a quickly drawn breath between each short sentence; and Adair could feel the sudden thrill and quiver of the hand that held hers for a moment. She sat hastily down, simply because she could not stand; a suffocating hand seemed to grasp her throat, the blood drummed in her ears. Sooner or later she must have met her cousin, she knew, but his sudden entrance had somehow found her all unprepared. Douglas went across the room, and pulling forward a somewhat heavier chair, said with a short nervous laugh—

“I always look out for something substantial; they don’t build chairs nowadays up to my weight, and I have a deep distrust of artistic upholstery, especially any of those beribboned basket things.” He sat down opposite her, and resting his chin on his hand, looked straight at her.

“You are very little changed, Adair,” he said abruptly, and as if involuntarily.

“So my friends are good enough to tell me,” said Adair, striving after a natural tone

of voice ; “ but after all, why should I be so much changed ? From the surprise with which every one greets me, one would think I was a sort of Rip Van Winkle come back after his twenty years’ sleep. Four years are not an eternity.”

“ *Are they not ?* ” said Douglas, significantly. “ A pretty fair sample of one, I should say.”

For a long minute there was silence, as the two looked at each other across the gulf of the years,—a gulf deep and hopeless as the grave itself, severing them as utterly as that last separation could ; a gulf that the rashness of the one and the pride of the other had dug between them, and of which there could be no bridging over any more.

Douglas was so far right in saying that Adair was but little changed. With her bright crown of hair uncovered once more, and the little softening tendrils curling round brow and temples, she looked her old girlish self again. And yet there was a subtle change, and he was quick to feel it. The

eyes were graver, the lines of the face more firmly drawn, the latent strength developed. She was no longer a girl in the innocence of ignorance, whose love was her life, and the narrow glen her world,—but a woman pure-hearted and brave-spirited, who had looked with tender pitiful eyes on sorrow and suffering and sin, and had lived in their midst unshrinking as unscathed. For many a long day she had had literally no time for thoughts of self, and the active kindly outgoing of heart and mind to those around her had preserved her from brooding despondency and self-pity, those busy gravers that carve deeper and bitterer lines on the human face than the heaviest sorrow bravely borne.

If she were little changed, she could not say the same of her cousin, Adair felt with a pang. Formerly Douglas had looked young for his age. He had retained a sort of good-natured boyish frankness of look and manner even in his young manhood; now he looked so much older than his thirty years, that a

stranger might readily have credited him with half-a-dozen more. For the first time Adair noticed a fleeting resemblance to his handsome brother Maurice. Was it only that family likeness which may exist among those of the same blood, however dissimilar the features may be? Or was it a similarity of expression—that undefinable look of a man who is seeking ever a sharper spur to jaded energies and failing zest in life? She could not say, but the blue-grey eyes, whose quick genial kindling had lit up so pleasantly the rather heavily featured face, had grown very cold and weary-looking. For the moment, however, they were neither dull nor cold, as he sat looking at her with an intentness of which he seemed unaware. Adair's eyes fell before it.

“How is Mrs Earlstoun?” she said hastily, —anything to break the silence, and to force the present on her mind once more.

“I don't think she is at all well. She never complains, and Isabel laughs at me for making a needless fuss, but I confess I

am very anxious about her. But surely," breaking off in some surprise, "you have seen her yourself to-day? you must know better than I."

"Oh yes, of course, I have been with Aunt Evelyn all day. I was not speaking of her; I meant——"

"My wife," said Douglas indifferently, as Adair paused. "Thanks, she is perfectly well, so far as I know. I thought you meant my mother. I so seldom hear Cicely spoken of by that name, that really I have ceased to think of her by it. I am Miss Charteris's husband now, Adair,—a dignified position, is it not?" with a little bitter flicker that was hardly a smile under the heavy reddish-fair moustache. "Tell me about yourself, though," he went on, as Adair did not speak,—"that is a more interesting subject. What have you been doing all this time?"

"There is very little to tell; it can all be put into one word,—nursing," said Adair, with a smile.

"I heard something of the sort. I met

Aggie the other day, and she told me so, but I could not get anything more out of her. I am afraid she thinks it dreadfully *infra dig.*, Adair."

"I am quite accustomed to that. I am a sort of unrepentant prodigal and pariah combined in her eyes at present."

"What a swell she is now!" with the same mirthless little smile. "It does seem odd to think of little Aggie mistress of Earlshope. She will make a brisk little *châtelaine*, though, and I'd rather have some one of our name in the old place than strangers. I should hardly have thought old Mitchell would have taken her fancy, but of course he has plenty, and she was always the practical member of the family. But this nursing, do you like it? I suppose you must, since you have kept to it so long."

"Yes, I like it," said Adair, stoutly. "I could not live without it now, or real work of some sort. I was half asleep and wholly stupid when you came in, from sheer want of something to do. I don't stand in the least

need of pity, but the provoking thing is, I cannot convince my friends of that." She spoke brightly, but with that slightly nervous haste which suggests that a pause in the talk would be a catastrophe.

"Curiously enough, I was hearing of you and your doings the other day from a man I have not met for years. He is too great a man, and too busy now, to waste much of his valuable time on a poor, do-nothing, down-in-the-world devil like myself. You remember Dallas?—but of course you must, since you have seen him so lately."

Adair's face was partly in shadow, but the light fell full on her throat, and on one slightly averted cheek. At the recollection of her last meeting with Dallas and his pungent plain-speaking a faint flush rose on her face, staining the pure whiteness. Douglas made a perceptible pause, and then went on in a harder voice: "He is by no means the moony artistic chap he used to be in the old days, when he divided his time between his studio and the slums. He keeps to the

slums still, certainly, but he seems to have substituted St Stephen's for the studio. Anyhow, he is one of the coming men, I believe, if he hasn't quite arrived yet. I can't tell how it came up, but he could not say enough about what you had done for some poor chap he was interested in. It was quite a thrilling tale, I can assure you."

"It was nothing," said Adair, with a sense of vexation she could hardly account for. "It was an interesting case, that was all. One gets very hard-hearted, you see, in a hospital."

"You here already, Douglas? You have been entertaining Adair in my absence—that is right," said Mrs Earlstoun, coming in. She glanced quickly from the one to the other. There was a look almost like relief on her face at finding the cousins talking in an apparently easy friendly way with each other. Douglas rose and kissed his mother, and drew her chair a little nearer for her. Something in the little salutation, so unconsciously given, from this weary-looking man whom she was

trying to reconcile with the Douglas she remembered, touched Adair, and made the brown eyes suddenly fill.

Mrs Earlstoun's auburn hair was whitening fast. Her fair colouring had faded, but the hazel eyes were bright and clear as ever, and though her step was slower, she moved with the old haughty grace. Her tall figure looked queenlier than ever in the plain heavy black gown she wore. Adair, whose romantic girlish admiration for her aunt had never lessened, was still more inclined to liken her, in her faded beauty and proud endurance, to her old heroines — Mary Stuart in the last scene at Fotheringhay, or Margaret of Anjou when Tewkesbury had been fought and lost, and her son and her hopes slain together.

“What news to-day mother?—better, I hope,” said Douglas; “or rather, I think I shall apply to Adair in future for the bulletins. She will give me, I hope, a full, true, and particular account, for I cannot trust you, I am sorry to say. You are a sayer of smooth things, as far as you are concerned yourself.”

“Is not that a shocking accusation, Adair?—from my own son, too!” with a fond look at the young man. Whatever else might have happened in those years, mother and son had drawn closer together, Adair thought. “I am better already. Adair will think I have decoyed her here on false pretences, I fear. It has done me good to see a fresh young face in the house once more.”

A clatter and a bang without. “That is Isabel,” said Douglas. “I could tell her barouche in a thousand, it has such a peculiarly aggressive way of drawing up. Another illustration of the power of mind over matter. If she has Mops with her, I shall stay; if not, I shall flee for my life.”

“Douglas, if little Evelyn is with her, I wish you would not make quite so much of her. It annoys Isabel. She says you are spoiling the child, and really I think there is some truth in it.”

“Oh, nonsense, mother! I don’t see the child once in a month. She must get precious little spoiling, poor atom, or she wouldn’t be so

keen over mine. Fact is, she's a pretty carriage ornament—much more so than a well-combed terrier, or my lady wouldn't trouble taking her round with her."

"Douglas, you are really too hard on Isabel."

"Think what I suffer at her hands. It is only fair I should have my chance now and then."

With a great rustling of silks, and her old air of eclipsing everybody and everything, Lady Maxwell sailed in, every inch the prosperous successful young matron. There were already suggestions that in the near future her already somewhat full proportions might become overblown, but in the meantime her *embonpoint* was not unbecoming. She nodded to Douglas, bestowed a couple of pale-kidded fingers and a round firm hemisphere of cheek upon Adair, made a perfunctory inquiry for her mother's health, and without waiting for an answer, turned again to Adair, and surveying her from head to foot, said with a sort of gratified surprise—

"Really, Adair, you are quite like your old self!"

“Why shouldn’t I be?” said Adair, smiling. “Did you expect to see a slightly modernised Mrs Gamp? She seems still to be the ideal of a nurse to the average mind.”

“Well, I did not know what to expect—what with such hard work as I suppose you have, and being among such horrid people, and seeing such dreadful things,” said Isabel, somewhat tartly, nettled perhaps at being classed with the average mind—she who flattered herself that she was already becoming a power in the political as well as in the social world. “I am sure it must be a relief to you to get away from it all.”

“It is a great relief to me at least,” said Mrs Earlstoun, with her old gracious smile; “only I feel very selfish absorbing her all to myself.”

“Go and shake hands with the lady, Evelyn; you are forgetting your manners,” said Isabel to the little fair-haired child beside her, with an air of dismissing an uninteresting subject.

“She is very like you, Aunt Evelyn,” said

Adair, looking down into the serious hazel eyes lifted to hers.

“Yes,” said Douglas, “the third generation is going to restore the family prestige as to looks. Mops is going to be a credit to us.”

Adair would fain have kept the little girl by her—as a rule she had a strong attraction for children; but little Evelyn twisted her hand away, and ran across the room to Douglas.

“Come to me, Evelyn; you must not trouble your uncle,” said Isabel, sharply.

“Don’t bother, Isabel. You know very well she doesn’t trouble me, and I can’t do her mind and manners much damage in the next ten minutes. Come along, Mops,” lifting the child to his knee, up which she was already scrambling.

“At least do not call her by that ridiculous name. Only yesterday she told Lady Allonby that her name was Mops.”

“Did she, indeed? how very shocking! I trust her ladyship survived it. Anything to please you, Isabel. I shall give her the whole

string, if you like, if only I knew it. What is your name, my child?" to Evelyn, who was regarding him with round admiring eyes. "Really I feel as if I were administering the Church catechism. It gives me quite a glow of virtue."

"A novel sensation, I should imagine," said Isabel, with a short laugh.

"Evlindolloleaisbel—Mops," said the child in one long breathless word, with a little shout of triumphant emphasis on the last syllable.

"There!" said Isabel, in a tone of righteous wrath. Mrs Earlstoun and Adair laughed.

"No, it is not to be Mops any more; in future it is only to be Evlindolloleaisbel," said Douglas. "Now, good people, pray don't mind us; Mo—Evelyn, &c., and I have a great deal to say to each other, and so much attention is really embarrassing to our modesty."

They apparently had a great deal to say to each other, and Adair found her attention wandering from the discussion of some open-air theatricals, into which Lady Maxwell at

once plunged to the babble of baby-talk and laughter, in which Douglas was joining with the utmost interest. For a moment she caught a glimpse of the old Douglas; the dull weight of weary indifference seemed lifted off. Then she heard Miss Charteris's name.

"Douglas," said Isabel, "is Cicely going to Clara's to-night?"

"Haven't an idea," said Douglas, without looking round.

"Are you not going? I wanted to see her about our theatricals. She has promised to act for Lady Monson, and I don't see why she might not do it for me. I thought I might have seen her to-night—it would have saved time. Did she say nothing about it? do you really not know?"

"Am I my wife's engagement-keeper, Isabel? I assure you I know as little what she will be doing to-night as I know what we may all be doing twenty years hence," and care as little, his tone said. "I am not going myself—not that that is of much importance. By the by, Adair, have you seen

Clara's Israelite,—the latest addition to our family?"

"You know very well that he is not a Jew; why will you persist in calling him one?" said Isabel.

"If he is not a Hebrew he must have stolen his face from one, then. I don't see why he shouldn't be a Jew: nobody cares much for pedigree now, but a descent from Moses and the prophets is surely as reputable as from some Portuguese pirate, or from those Border thieves we used to be so proud of once, though I don't think we mind much about them now."

"You are prejudiced against Mr Saldanha, Douglas," said Mrs Earlstoun; "you must not heed what he says, Adair," smiling.

"I am not saying anything against him, am I? After all, it is Clara's concern; and what a man is, is of little consequence to what he has, and in that direction he is eminently satisfactory, I suppose. But she is a wonderful young lady now, Adair; she can give us all points, even Isabel, as to the very latest way

of doing things. In fact she is the very latest thing herself, and I don't know if I altogether admire the new development. My dear Mops, have mercy on me," with a sudden change of voice ; " pray remember that a man's character largely depends on the condition of his collar," as little Evelyn suddenly bestowed a strangling hug upon him. She considered her Uncle Douglas's undivided attention her rightful due, and was beginning to feel herself overlooked. More visitors dropped in, and presently Douglas went away, when, with a child's instinct, Evelyn took refuge with Adair, and regaled her until Isabel rose with eloquent but incoherent accounts of her " Unkey Dudlas's " perfections.

The last visitor gone, Mrs Earlstoun lay back in her chair, her eyes feverishly bright, a red spot on each cheek.

" Is not this too much for you, Aunt Evelyn ? " said Adair, anxiously. " Do you always have as many people in the afternoon ? "

" No, not always ; a frail old woman like me,

who cannot afford entertaining, is not likely to be overwhelmed with visitors. However, I have no right to complain; my friends have been very kind. Douglas comes nearly every day. I don't know what I should have done without him—he has been the best of sons to me, poor boy. He is always scolding Isabel and Clara for not coming oftener, but when I was their age I was tremendously busy too. One must not be too exacting. Clara tells me I have no idea of the whirl of life now. She sends me her victoria when she does not require it herself,” with an amused indulgent smile. “Poor child! she is very young yet, and one cannot blame her for being a little bit *exaltée*, with so much on her hands, after the quiet life we have been living of late. Certainly it is a splendid match for her, but Isabel has all the credit for it, which is perhaps just as well, as Douglas was so much against it. I had to tell him at last that I really thought he was rather unreasonable. Because a man chances to be wealthy, that is not to say a girl is marrying him for his

money alone. Mr Saldanha is devoted to Clara, and they seem very happy together." How much the lately married couple might be together, Mrs Earlstoun probably did not think it needful to inquire particularly. "I daresay it must be his own experience that has embittered him, poor fellow," she said with a sigh. "I suppose you think Douglas a good deal altered?" with rather a wistful look at Adair.

Mrs Earlstoun had never been able wholly to rid her mind and conscience of undefined misgivings as to her share in keeping Douglas's engagement a secret from Adair in that bygone summer. She had an uneasy longing to know how matters had really stood between the cousins; and in spite of the sense of rest with which Adair's very presence inspired her in her weakness and weariness, she had been doubting whether she had done right in bringing them together again. To-day she had taken comfort from the apparent ease with which they had met. After all, it was long ago now, and Adair was too sensible a girl to

fret. Certainly she had no appearance of having done so, thought Mrs Earlstoun as she looked into the fair face before her.

“Yes,” said Adair, in rather a troubled voice, “I own I was struck by the change in him ; but he must have had a great deal to try him. The changes at—at Earlschope must have been very hard on him.”

“Yes, indeed ; it has made little difference to the girls, and I have had my day, but it has altered all his life : and then, poor boy, he has no home to make up for it. He wanted to go away to Australia or America, I don’t think he cared much where, but I begged him to stay. I am afraid it was very weak of me, but I felt that if he went away I would have lost everything indeed. Well, I suppose most people live to repent forcing their own wishes on any one,” she said in a lowered voice, as if speaking more to herself than to Adair. Adair was surprised that Mrs Earlstoun should speak so openly to her, but as she seemed to find it a relief, she sat listening in pained silence, trying desperately to stifle that importunate

question, "Did I do right?" that had raised its voice before, but whose clamour filled her mind now with a kind of terror. What if she had wrought all this misery for a false scruple, —worse still, for her own pride, which she had called right, and honour, and duty? It mattered little enough now; it was done, and never could be undone. Never!

"Sometimes I wonder if things might have been better if they had had a child," went on Mrs Earlstoun, in a sort of musing tone—"you see how fond he is of little Mops, as he calls her; or if Cicely had not gone back to the stage. Douglas was bitterly averse to it, but he said he had no right to prevent it, seeing he could not give her what she had married him for any longer. He thinks she married him only for money and position, but I am sure he is mistaken, though he only laughs at me if I try to hint it to him. Poor woman! I have no cause to love her, but I cannot help feeling sorry for her. In her own strange way, I believe, she cares very deeply for Douglas. A woman's heart is an odd thing, Adair; the

unattainable seems to have a charm for some. She is frightfully extravagant too, though perhaps one cannot blame her for that. She makes a very large income, of course, but Douglas won't touch it. I do not know how he manages, but he has insisted on giving me my jointure in full, though I tell him less would do, for I am sure he cannot spare it. That is one comfort in Earlshope being let, it should make matters easier for him. By the by," with a smile, "how fortunately that turned out! It must be a great comfort to your mother to have Agnes so well settled."

"Yes; and a great pleasure to Agnes to be able to provide for mother now."

"It must be. I think Agnes was always your mother's favourite—at least they seem very happy together. They were here some days ago, looking like sisters rather than mother and daughter. How well your mother looks, and how young!" with an involuntary heavy sigh. "Ah, well! a marriage *with* money—I don't say *for* money,"—smiling,

“is a very pleasant thing, however Douglas may inveigh against it.”

“‘Doant thou marry for munny, but goâ wheer munny be,’”

said Adair, rising with a laugh. “Now I am going to exercise my prerogative, and say that you must not talk any more for a little ; and another day I am afraid I shall have to shut the door if as many people come as were here to-day. You do not know how tyrannical I can be, Aunt Evelyn, when I try.”

“Then you need not try, Adair, for I simply cannot do without society. It has been my life too long. I am afraid I am like the other old farmer with his ale. You must let me have it—company, not the ale, I mean,” with a laugh—“‘an’ if I mun doy, I mun doy.’”

CHAPTER VI.

MEANTIME Douglas, disregarding the blandishments of various hansom cabmen, had turned into the Park, and avoiding the Drive, which was now at its fullest, was walking slowly westward. The day was one of those that occasionally slip in amid the gritty east winds of May, as if to show that there may have been some foundation for the fallacious descriptions which poets, generally of the olden days, it must be admitted, have conspired to give of that most tantalising month. Not all the city smoke could dull the soft spring blue above, nor dim the sunshine that poured in such rejoicing floods through the leaves, not yet parched and dust-laden as they would be ere long, but fluttering golden green in their first silken freshness. A day when, for no

ostensible practical reason, the spirits unaccountably rise. Bills have to be paid, letters written, printers to be kept supplied, creditors to be soothed,—all the hundred and one worries of daily life are exactly the same, but somehow they do not seem so utterly unsurmountable as they did under yesterday's iron-grey sky, when a shrill arid north-easter was filling mouth and eyes with prickling dust, and whirling along that drift of loose straw and torn papers which always mysteriously accompanies it. Yesterday the grasshopper was a burden; to-day the faith that can remove mountains does not seem utterly beyond even average humanity. But the spell of the spring sunshine, however potent it may be, is often capricious in its working, and to-day it had no power to chase the cloud from Douglas's face. Perhaps that may have been because he hardly lifted his eyes from the gravel, save once when a small child fell directly in his path, and lay screaming as if it expected nothing less than the immediate fate of a worshipper of Juggernaut. He

picked the little thing up, set it on its feet, and brushed the dust from its frock, while it stared up more in fright than in gratitude at its tall protector. He walked as if he were in no hurry to reach his destination, but the slowest pace at which a long-limbed young man can walk will take him soon enough from Hyde Park Corner to Kensington. Cicely had lately established herself there in a bran-new old-English house, all red brick and timbers, pointed gables and dormer-windows without, and abounding within with awkward corners, break-neck stairs, and sloping ceilings against which Douglas complained he was for ever knocking his head. But it was fashionable, expensive, and artistic, a word which nowadays is answerable for almost as many crimes as liberty,—and what did a little inconvenience matter?

At the drawing-room door Douglas paused a second, as if it cost him something of an effort to go in. The room was over-heated, over-crowded, over-scented. Cicely was of a chilly nature, and in spite of the May sun-

shine a brisk fire was burning. Her taste, which was perfect as far as her dress was concerned, was singularly at fault in the arrangement of her room, which was a jumble of every possible style, with a medley of incongruous ornaments. Grotesque Chinese monsters overweighted an *escritoire* which Marie Antoinette might have used; dainty Sèvres and Dresden figures were wedged in among Japanese jars on Chippendale cabinets or on buffets of old carved oak. The chairs and couches were of all shapes and forms, from the most severely artistic to bloated-looking puffs of plush or satin; while carefully draped easels and flower-stands, broad-fronded palms, and great oriental jars, stood about everywhere to complete the confusion of the unwary. Whatever Cicely fancied she immediately bought, and space had to be made for it somehow, till the room was, as Douglas said, a cross between a curiosity-shop and a conservatory,—for if there were too many fans and plaques, too many draperies and Eastern stuffs and embroideries, too much china and

lacquer and gilding, there were, if that can be possible, too many flowers also. Not the wholesome open-air spring flowers which were blooming in such abundance everywhere, overflowing the baskets of the flower-sellers, and bringing the breath of the fields and the woods into the crowded streets. Instead of these, great groups of costly exotics flaunted their gaudy blossoms, and made the already oppressive air sickly with their sweetness.

Cicely was lying on a sofa drawn near the fire, in an attitude of graceful languor,—one which was familiar enough by photograph to her many admirers. She wore a loose tea-gown of a shade of her favourite yellow, like the warm rich hue of the gorse in bloom, which made a very striking study in colour against the dull metallic blue of her pile of cushions. Beside her a singularly handsome if somewhat effeminate-looking young man was sitting. Douglas and he exchanged careless little nods, and the visitor instantly rose with that haste which is almost insolent, as it conveys so plainly to the third party that

it is useless to remain since he or she has been inconsiderate enough to come in. Douglas looked after him with rather an amused expression.

“So that is the latest victim! I always know that they are pretty far gone when they bestow that peculiarly malignant scowl on me. I can’t compliment you on your selection this time, Cicely—Dunscombe always appeared to me the greatest bore going. He has a pretty face, if that is a merit in a man.”

“I can quite understand *you* thinking it rather the reverse,” said Cicely, with her little artificial laugh; “but you need not call him my selection, for I simply cannot get rid of him. He has been here all afternoon.”

“How thankful you should be to me for putting him to flight, then! I say, mayn’t I open a window? this room is like an oven, or the burning fiery furnace itself.”

“For mercy’s sake, don’t!” exclaimed Cicely, “or I shall be as hoarse as a crow to-night.”

“Just as you please,” said Douglas, threading his way through the labyrinth to the window, and looking idly out; “but I think if you went out more and did not stew yourself in those frightfully hot rooms, you would not have so many colds.”

“Go out more! Why, I have been on the run all day. What with an endless rehearsal and a *matinée*, and Mrs Sylvestre’s *fête* for the children of supers—by the by, Douglas, you might have come for a little. I was dragged in to sell at one of the tables, and the crowd was awful—and then a whole mob here this afternoon. Oh dear me! I have had a *dreadful* day of it,” yawning dismally, and stretching her long slender arms, displayed by her loose falling sleeves, above her head. She did look tired enough. Her slight figure had grown thin to meagreness; her dark complexion had a lifeless withered look, the result of paint and powder; while a deep brownish shadow encircled her light eyes, which, in the absence of any kindling excitement, had a dull glassy look.

"You do far too much, Cicely," said Douglas, kindly enough. "It would knock up a Hercules. I should think the theatre quite enough for any one, but I suppose you mean going to half-a-dozen houses after it to-night?"

"How can I help it?" said Cicely, sharply. "*One* of us must work, unless we are to vegetate in some mouldy country corner."

"That is scarcely the only alternative," said Douglas, coldly. The taunt was an old one, but it was none the pleasanter on that account. Douglas, however, had grown too much accustomed to such speeches from Cicely to heed it as he would once have done. It is no good sign of domestic peace when bitter speeches can be easily condoned.

"Have you been at Park Street to-day?" asked Cicely, after a little pause, in a more conciliatory tone.

"Yes."

"How is Mrs Earlstoun?"

"Much the same, thanks."

“Isabel does not seem to think there is much the matter with her. Don’t you think you fuss too much about it? Old people like your mother cannot expect to be so strong as they once were.”

“Isabel knows precious little about it, and cares less, if you ask me.”

“By the by, she told me that your cousin was coming to act as nurse, or companion, or something of that sort. Rather a nice-looking girl as I remember her—for those who like violent colouring. What is her outlandish name, now? Has she come?”—a kindling gleam awakening in the light eyes.

“Yes.”

“Ah, then, virtue will not be its own reward any longer. You will have some other inducement besides filial devotion to take you to Park Street now. You used to have a little *tendresse* in that quarter; or, perhaps, it was mostly on the other side. I remember she simply would not believe me when I told her of our engagement. Poor thing! I think she was rather shabbily treated. I

am afraid, Douglas, you must have acted the gay deceiver there. Be merciful to the poor girl now."

Douglas muttered something indistinct, but evidently of a comminatory purport, under his moustache.

"What did you say?" inquired Cicely, suavely. "What a boon that nursing must be for love-lorn damsels! It is as good as taking the veil, but not quite so irrevocable. I fancy she thinks she has worn the willow long enough, and that she will be inclined to profit by her sister's shining example, and go upon the war-path on her own account."

"Look here, Cicely," said Douglas, facing round suddenly from the window; "if you must speak of my cousin Adair, you will have the goodness to speak of her with proper respect, at least."

"Dear me! what have I said?" said Cicely, with an air of injured innocence. "If my harmless figure of speech offends you, all I meant was that it is to be hoped she may be as prudent, or as lucky—which shall we call

it?—as her own sister, or as Clara. You cannot object to that, surely. I have no doubt Isabel will be quite pleased to launch her: she has her hands free now, and she is always in her glory when she is managing some other body's affairs. I am afraid, however, she may find it rather a task. Miss What's-her-name must be rather *passée* after all those years. She must be nearly thirty, I should think, and a *femme de trente ans* requires to be married to have any fascination."

"She is nothing of the sort," said Douglas indignantly, falling at once into the trap; "she is not much more than twenty-five."

"Oh, indeed! How do you come to be so well-informed? Did she tell you so?" with a sneer.

"I know her age by my own," said Douglas briefly, with a sudden recollection of how he used to boast of that four years' seniority in their boy-and-girl arguments or quarrels long ago. "She does not look a day older than when I saw her last," he added, with very questionable wisdom.

“I am afraid that is more than any of us can say; perhaps the glamour may have been in your eyes,” said Cicely, with her artificial laugh. Age was a sore point to her, as she was a year or so older than her husband. “It seems a tender subject yet, so I had better say no more; but if you wax so hot in her defence, especially when there is no need for it, I shall think it a case of

‘*Nous revenons toujours*
À nos premiers amours,’

and turn jealous,”—watching his face narrowly.

“From such a calamity, good Lord deliver us!” said Douglas, piously. “You may keep your mind easy as to that, I think. I might as well emulate Othello on account of little Dunscombe’s *petits soins*.” He turned towards the door.

“Wait a moment, Douglas. What are you going to do to-night?”

“Oh, nothing particular. I wish some one would invent something to do. I am going in search of some dinner first.”

Cicely, like most *artistes*, dined early, and Douglas at one or other of his clubs.

"*Et après?*" inquired Cicely.

"Anything that turns up," with a yawn.

"Well, if you have nothing better to do, I wish you would come with me to Clara's."

"Why did I not say I had a life-and-death engagement?" groaned Douglas. "Come, Cicely, let me off; what good on earth can I do you? I am not specially useful, and I am sure I am not ornamental. Besides, though you dance very prettily, it is no great diversion to me to stand an hour or two in a doorway watching you."

"Why don't you dance yourself, then?"

"*I!* My dancing days are pretty well over."

"You used to be fond enough of it once."

"I used to be fond of raspberry-jam once, I am told," gravely.

"Douglas, you are too provoking," said Cicely, with a little stamp of her foot. "Cannot you understand that I may wish sometimes to have you with me? People are

beginning to talk about your never being seen with me."

"Really! I am flattered that my existence should be remembered. Well, well," hastily, "anything for a quiet life. I shall immolate myself for once to relieve your friends' anxiety. Shall I meet you at Clara's—or how?"

"Why shouldn't you come to the theatre to-night, and we could go together?"

"Like Darby and Joan. What a pretty picture!" said Douglas, with a hard laugh.

"I wish you would come. I ask it as a favour, really," said Cicely, coming nearer, and flashing one of her old smiles upon him. "You have not seen me act for years. Why will you not come? This is the first night of the new piece; every one will be there."

Douglas's face changed. "I wish you would not ask me, Cicely. I have told you often enough I do not care to see you act. I do not wish to be unkind, but I would rather not come."

"But why?" said Cicely, impatiently;

“you go to plenty of other theatres—why will you never come to see me?” It was hard that she could not have the opportunity of exercising this once all-powerful spell.

“Why? Oh, because you always act such doleful things. At my time of life one begins to incline to farce rather than to tragedy,” said Douglas, falling back into the tone of dreary flavourless jesting which had become habitual to him. “It is all very well for innocents like Dunscombe to steep their young spirits in gloom; they’ll find in time they need something more cheerful. You resemble the apostle in dying daily, if in nothing else, Cicely. I suppose this play will be like all the rest. Pray, remember how painful it will be to my feelings as a husband to see you perishing in prolonged agonies.”

Cicely’s eyes fairly blazed. “I believe you could endure the sight of my dying remarkably well if only it were real; nothing would please you better. You could console your cousin Adair then. It is my nightly resurrec-

tion that is the disappointment," she said, in a sort of cold bitter fury.

Douglas looked at her in silence and walked away.

She stood for a second, and then ran after him. "Douglas, I did not mean it. I should not have said it," putting her hand on his arm.

"No; you should *not* have said it. What makes you say such things to me, Cicely?" he said sternly.

"I don't know; I can't help it sometimes. If you wouldn't be so hard to me—if you would sometimes do what I ask. Don't look at me like that, Douglas; you don't know how miserable I am."

Douglas drew his arm away. "For pity's sake, be reasonable, Cicely, if you can," he said, with a kind of desperate patience. "Why should you be miserable? In what way am I hard upon you? Do I interfere with you in the slightest degree? If you will ask the one thing I cannot and will not do, I cannot help it, I must refuse you. But

if you want anything else tell me, and I will do it if I can. What is the use of making a scene of this sort over it. I am sure I have no idea what it is all about. There, go and get a rest, you are over-tired—that is why you are so easily excited,” in a more soothing tone.

Cicely waited until the door had closed, and then, throwing herself on the sofa, burst into one of her fits of frantic sobbing. “I am a fool, an utter fool, but I can’t bear it—I can’t bear it. What has brought that girl here again? It will be worse than ever now,” she gasped out.

In some respects, as Mrs Earlstoun had said, Cicely was almost more to be pitied than Douglas. From his marriage he had nothing to hope or to expect; it was a yoke he had blindly taken on himself, and which had to be borne somehow. When Adair had left him he had gone to Cicely, and in a sort of reckless indifference as to what he did—nothing mattered much now—had told her plainly that he had no love to offer her; but

that if she chose to take him, he was ready to fulfil his promise, and to do his best for her happiness. And Cicely had chosen to take the risk. Once her own, she persuaded herself that she could win his love back, refusing to realise that it had not been love at all, but a mere momentary impulse that had bound them together at first. Douglas honestly tried, as he had said, "to do his best." It was not in his nature to be ungentle to any woman, least of all to the one whom he had made his wife; and if Cicely could but have had a little patience, he would have been a very kind and indulgent husband, if not a loving one, to her. But to Cicely everything was poisoned by the thought that she would never have been Douglas's wife unless Adair had rejected him. If he were silent, he was thinking of Adair, she decided; if he spoke, she read effort in every word and look. The cold gentleness of his manner maddened her. With all her cleverness, she was utterly without tact in dealing with her husband. It is not in vain that love is represented as blind,

especially such love as Cicely's, which seeks only its own gratification; and she wearied Douglas with ceaseless appeals for the love he could not give her, or with reproaches for his indifference. At first matters had gone more smoothly—outwardly at least. Cicely had been absorbed in her new life and her endless engagements. Then had come the sudden reverse, and Cicely had immediately announced her intention of returning to the stage. She had already been missing the excitement of her former career amid everything that wealth could give her; and love in a cottage, especially when *she* had to provide all the love, was not to her taste, she told Douglas, when he implored her in vain to give up the idea. Possibly he hardly realised how great the sacrifice to her would be; but naturally he argued that if Cicely loved him as she said she did, it would surely not be hard for her to make it for his sake. His pride was smarting sorely enough already from the change in his position—the necessity of leaving the old home, the burden of debt

he could not and might never be able to discharge; but all this was as nothing compared with what was to him the unspeakable humiliation of his wife appearing in public again. *His wife!* that made all the difference,—a difference that Cicely could not or would not comprehend.

After that her importunities fell upon deaf ears. She had refused the one proof of love she could have given him; and now her protestations simply bored him, and he took less and less pains to conceal it. Irritated by her failure, by his growing coldness, Cicely avenged herself by mercilessly flaunting her success in his face—by taunting him cruelly with his poverty, with his inability to provide her with the luxuries she could now procure for herself, till Douglas loathed even to enter the gaudy overcrowded house. Touch her money—the money procured by his own and his wife's degradation!—he would as soon have handled the price of blood. She tried to sting him into jealousy—anything rather than indifference—by encouraging her many admirers, by

carrying her flirtations to the very verge of what society permits, only for the additional mortification of finding that Douglas appeared totally unconscious, or else that he laughed at her adorers as he had done at Lord Dunscombe. She could not see that her husband was hopelessly estranged from her, and that her words and ways were only widening the breach between them day by day. Now, to the ever-gnawing sense of her powerlessness, to the bitter inward conviction that her husband despised both her and the love she had thrust on him in vain, was added the old rage of jealousy which had only been smouldering—never extinguished—and which now burst into flame at the very mention of Adair's name.

For a time Cicely lay helplessly sobbing, till prudence conquered passion, and she recollected that it was time to dress, and that she need not display redder eyes than need be to the curious ones of her maid. As she slowly walked towards the door, she caught sight of her face in a little Venetian mirror, and paused

for a second, her features contracting with a spasm of very real pain as she recalled Douglas's words, "She does not look a day older." What of herself,—of those sallow, tear-stained cheeks, those sunken lustreless eyes that gazed back so blankly at her? With a sharp impatient exclamation she turned hastily away.

The sun was already high in the sky, the bright May morning had been shining clear and fair for hours in its new-born freshness before thousands of unseeing, unheeding eyes. Another day of work, of weariness, of want or suffering, had begun, that was all. What did it matter whether the sun shone or not, or the air stole in soft and balmy, its early coolness waking memories of shaded dewy nooks where, amid the wrinkled brown beech-leaves the primroses still lingered, or of some deep-rutted lane where the hedges were laden with the summer snow of the white blossoming hawthorn? What, indeed, to those whose only greeting to the new day was, Would God it were evening! Among the many who

had no other welcome for the spring morning was Douglas Earlstoun, as he sat by a widely opened window, where he had flung himself down on coming in some time before. All the evening he had followed Cicely about, and waited for her with most exemplary patience,—patience that was perhaps largely due to the fact that for the greater part of the time he was hardly conscious of his surroundings—the lights, the music, the ever-shifting groups, or even the knot of bored-looking loungers immediately around him. His thoughts were far enough away from them all, and once Cicely had come up and had laughingly taken his arm before he was aware of her presence. Her manner to her husband in public was marked, save on the very rare occasions when she forgot her *rôle*, by such a charmingly affectionate gaiety, that when the relations between the two were discussed—as they were often enough—the blame was for once not laid on the woman. Miss Charteris was considered to have been not much more fortunate in her choice than celebrated *artistes*

unhappily usually are. "No wonder Cis Charteris consoles herself; and, by Jove! she might be excused a good deal more, and it would only serve that fellow Earlstoun right, he is such a confoundedly morose beggar," one ingenuous youth in her train remarked to another on observing the little incident, and Douglas's start of surprise and his absent manner.

No one can live for ever either upon the heights of rapture or in the depths of misery. By imperceptible degrees the intolerable becomes at last the commonplace of existence. Somehow or other, the back accommodates itself to the burden which seemed likely at first to crush its bearer to the very earth. Douglas had gradually sunk into a sort of apathetic acquiescence with his lot, seeking after a time only to stifle thought and memory, and to find distraction how and where he could. When a man has neither hope nor interest in life, and his closest companion is a woman for whom he has neither love nor respect, he will easily find distraction enough and to spare, and will soon

cease to be over-particular as to its nature. Even in this life there may come to a man a realisation of his position—of the end where heedless unchecked desire is tending—as sudden and startling as ever burst upon that poor unsuspecting soul, when “in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments.” And some such awakening had come to Douglas as he sat motionless, the morning breeze stealing in and lifting the hair from his hot forehead. For the moment he was thinking not so much of his lost love as of his lost life, his lost self, the man he might have been and ought to have been if he had not let sheer despairing weariness of life master him, and make it seem needless to strive after anything—even after good. Little though he noticed them at the time, his very surroundings impressed themselves on him, and added to the growing sense of self-disgust. In Cicely’s household, if her own comfort was attended to, every one might do pretty much what was right in their own eyes, and the dining-room presented as dismal a spectacle as ever did a belated reveller sur-

prised by the morning sunlight. The remains of the last meal still littered the table, with all its unlovely accompaniments of faded flowers, clouded glasses, and soiled plates. The fireplace was choked with white ashes; the chairs stood about anyhow, just as they had been pushed aside the night before. In contrast with all this sordid dreariness and disorder, which seemed to the young man only too good a type of his own existence, there rose up before him the face of Adair, the first sight of which had been enough to work this revolution within. The loved, well-remembered face, so unchanged yet with a new look upon it—a look that seemed to set her infinitely apart from him, further far than the impassable barriers of human law that divided them for ever in this world! Why need he have severed himself from her in spirit too? He had ample time for his bitter thoughts. Cicely, dosed with chloral, would sleep till far on in the morning, and must not be disturbed. The few unconsidered millions of people around who had not yet

altered the old relations between day and night, but who began their work at 6 A.M.—to cease it if they were men at 6 P.M., if women at an indefinite hour—had already accomplished a considerable portion of their day's task before a dishevelled housemaid came yawning into the room, and emitted a shrill exclamation at finding her master already there.

CHAPTER VII.

“How are you, mother? Better, I am sure. Why, you look ten years younger since I saw you last! I have only five minutes to spare, but I thought I would rush up, for I don’t know when I shall have time again. I have to go out of town with Frank for a couple of days,—awful bore, but we can’t get off it; and I’ve fifty things to do to-day, and no time to do them. Is this Adair? Why, you are a perfect beauty. What a shame to have been hiding yourself out of sight all those years! Mother, you must not let her mew herself up any longer; she would make quite a sensation. You must come to my next Friday evening, Adair. Do you know that your hair is the very latest colour? Compton will rave about it whenever he sees it; he’ll want to paint

you immediately as a Venus or a Magdalen or a Love, or something or other, only you must not mind if he makes you a little peaky and hollow-cheeked looking, and you'll have a mob round you at the New Gallery next year. Pity it can't be sooner," reflectively.

Adair laughed. "Spare me any more, Clara; and if you want me to do anything for you, tell me what it is. I am quite as open to flattery as most people, but I am afraid such a dose of it at once can hardly be disinterested. If Mr Compton or any other one is inclined to admire my red locks, they are at liberty to do so; but I have no desire to figure as a saint or a sinner, nor to make a sensation now or next year."

"But I am quite in earnest. You have taken *me* by surprise, I assure you, but of course I was only a child when I saw you last. And you have really been nursing sick people all those years! Well, it just proves what I say, that society is the hardest work going. Talk about needlewomen and match-girls and all those people they make such a fuss over,

and get up palaces for them and goodness knows all what ! I am sure they are not nearly so overdriven as we are. Really I have never a moment to myself, mother ; I am sure you would pity me if you knew all I had to do to-day," and Mrs Saldanha dropped into the nearest chair, assuming an attitude of the utmost languor that her round vigorous figure would permit. Adair regarded her with dancing eyes. She wore an impossible hat, and a gown which would have been pronounced glaringly vulgar if displayed by a shop-girl or milliner, but which as worn by the "popular Mrs Saldanha," was declared by the society papers to be "extremely *chic*, if somewhat daring." On her fresh young cheeks was a coating of wholly unnecessary powder, and she had apparently been trying to eliminate the reddish tinge from her own abundant hair, or else Adair's memory had played her false. The contrast was certainly sufficiently striking between this "new development" and the Clara she remembered—the bouncing, sandy-haired, fifteen-year-old tomboy of the old days.

“ You had a great crowd last night. I saw the list in the ‘ Post ’ this morning,” said Mrs Earlstoun, smiling.

“ Crowd ! I should think so ; but I wonder you keep to that old-fashioned thing. Some of the new ones are far spicier, and they don’t consider it necessary for you to have a title or be a slow old political foggy, like those Isabel goes in for, before your doings can be worth recording. Now I like people who are talked about for something, and the more they are talked of the better.”

“ Some of your friends are a little too much talked of, Clara.”

“ Oh, rubbish, mother ! how should you know ? you are not going out now, and you take everything Douglas says for gospel. He might be a little more particular about his own friends, I should say, without doing himself any harm. By the by, he actually did me the honour of coming last night. Cicely must have brought him by main force, I think, for he only stood at the door and looked as gloomy as a sphinx. He will be

giving me a fine lecture the next time he sees me, whenever that may be, on the crew I had got together. I am not going to stand it any more, though ; I don't see what business it is of his," with a toss of her head that made the wondrous erection perched thereon rock and quiver.

"You are very young yet, Clara, and your brother knows a great deal more of the world——"

"And I mean to know it too," jumping up ; "but men would like to keep all the fun to themselves. As long as Frank is pleased with me, that is quite enough, isn't it ? indeed he has just *got* to be pleased, as I tell him. Now, mother, don't you begin, or I'll run away. I must do it whether I will or no. I am going to Hélène about gowns, and she'll give my time to some other body if I'm not up to the moment. Don't forget Friday, Adair ; you must come. We're in doleful want of a new beauty this season so far, and I don't see why you shouldn't have a chance. I should like to have the dressing of you. I have a gown in my

mind's eye that would be just the thing,—we have both good figures. Cicely now is a perfect bag of bones, and yet she will wear low dresses,” smoothing her own plump well-moulded arms complacently. “It’s amazing how she goes down, though; she has always a mob about her,” and with a breathless embrace, which transferred a share of her powder to her mother’s face, she disappeared, suddenly thrusting her head round the door again to exclaim, “Be sure and tell Douglas I have been here.”

Mrs Earlstoun laughed, but rather sadly. “Clara’s appearances partake of the nature of an earthquake or a whirlwind, or some violent visitation of that sort. I think Douglas is the only one of whom she stands in any awe, but she has got very emancipated since her marriage. I hope you will excuse her heedless talk, Adair; she ‘goes in,’ as she would say, for being very outspoken and eccentric. But she is quite right in one thing, and that is, that you are not to be allowed to bury yourself altogether with me. Now you need not shake your head, Adair. It would not be

fair to Agnes ; she will naturally want you to go out with her. Then think of the pleasure it would be to me, Adair. I am a very frivolous old woman, and I may as well confess it ; if I cannot go out myself I should like to see you have a little enjoyment, and I am quite ready to take a very childish pleasure in hearing ‘all about it’ afterwards. As Clara says, I should like to have the dressing of you. It is quite true, my dear—you *are* beautiful, if you will let me say it,” with a sudden sigh.

“*Et tu, Brute !*” said Adair, laughing and blushing a little. “What is making every one so very obliging to me to-day ? It is very charming to be told such nice things, Aunt Evelyn ; if I could only believe them, it would be all the better. It is rather a reversal of the usual order of things to be receiving compliments and beginning the world at my time of life.”

In a short time Adair declared that she was the victim of a deep-laid conspiracy between her aunt and Agnes ; that she had been induced to come to Park Street on false pre-

tences ; that it was merely a scheme to entrap her into going into society. Mrs Earlstoun would have had her go out every evening ; and the number of visitors, in spite of Adair's protestations, increased rather than diminished. Soon after her arrival, Dallas had made his appearance with a great many somewhat confused apologies to Mrs Earlstoun for not having called earlier to inquire for her. She had received him very graciously, and very soon he had become a regular visitor, explaining at first, with a good deal of elaboration, how he had only dropped in on his way to or from the House ; some question was before it, some debate going on, which he thought might interest them, and so on. In a little, Adair welcomed him very frankly. They had many subjects in common, besides their mutual interest in the unlucky "trophy," now fast recovering, and of whose progress Dallas brought her information with praiseworthy regularity. He introduced a new element into her life. At the hospital she had had ample opportunity for studying and

observing humanity and the life of the poor, but for years she had had almost no conversation with her equals, save in the strictly professional intercourse between nurse and doctor, in which everything was narrowed down to the "cases" in hand, their progress or special features of interest. Now, for the first time, she was brought into contact with clever men engrossed in the same subjects that interested her, willing to take information from her, listening to her opinions, and occasionally paying her the compliment of keenly combating them—for Dallas sometimes brought his friends with him, or introduced Adair to the work they were carrying on. When she expressed a wish to hear a debate at the House, he obtained permits for her and Lady Maxwell, who was always ready to chaperon her there, with a frequency that might have aroused Adair's suspicions if she had known the difficulty of obtaining them when any matter of special interest is up. On one night Dallas had himself taken a considerable part in the debate. Possibly he

spoke none the worse for knowing that up behind the grating a pair of brown eyes were glowing and kindling while he spoke, as a knight of old would charge all the more valiantly when his ladye was looking down on the tilt-yard. If any lingering remnants of Adair's old inclination to regard him as somewhat of a *dilettante* in philanthropy, as in art, were still left, they must have been finally dissipated by the force and energy with which he spoke. She could not fail to observe, either, that he was listened to as one who has mastered his subject and speaks from experience. Probably Dallas had never heard sweeter words than her congratulations to him afterwards. A new world of thought was opened to her ; her mind, so long confined to one groove, had room to expand ; fresh ideas were crowding in upon her, and she was but too glad to welcome every mental distraction, or even a new acquaintance, as a defence against the one thought, the one presence, which was growing but too absorbing. She had opened all her heart to her cousin

once,—she could not keep it too closely shut from him now. He must never guess what power his voice had to thrill her still, or how some sudden glance, when for a moment the cold veil of indifference seemed lifted off his eyes, and the old Douglas looked out at her again, could make the words die off her lips. But such moments were not frequent, and Douglas himself showed no inclination to seek them. After their first meeting he had greeted Adair with quiet friendliness, nothing more. On the rare occasions when the three chanced to be alone, he directed most of his talk to his mother, and often he would sit entirely silent, when Adair was a trifle ostentatiously absorbed in her talk with Dallas or some of her new friends. Now and then he would drop a little cynical remark or question with just that annoying amount of bitter truth in it which resolves the nebulous cloud of sanguine anticipation back to its very small foundation upon fact or result. At other times he would turn off every argument or appeal with a careless jest, till he often

seriously vexed Adair, who was still in the first stage of enthusiasm. She had not much time, however, for dwelling on thoughts or fancies; for whether it was owing to her care, or to the little stir of fresh life and interest, Mrs Earlstoun seemed undoubtedly better, and was for ever urging her to accept the invitations which were coming thickly enough. Lady Maxwell, who aimed at a political *salon*, and had ambitious dreams of yet guiding the course of affairs by means of that docile puppet Sir Claud, speedily discovered that a hint that she expected Miss Earlstoun was sufficient to secure the presence of Mr Dallas and one or two others, who, like himself, were not yet deeply pledged to either party, and whom she had hitherto failed to attract. Agnes found that her sister was indispensable at all her entertainments; and Clara—in whose set it was the thing to run wild over somebody or something for a time—was for ever singing her praises and beseeching her presence at her somewhat heterogeneous gatherings. By degrees Adair became

conscious, with some amusement, that she had, to quote Clara, "made a sensation." According to Adair, it was merely one of those odd caprices of fortune by which gifts are bestowed on those who have no special desire for them. The fact was, however, that even among younger and more regularly beautiful girls there was something unusual in her style—a calm aloofness, a directness of speech and manner, which were certainly not conventional, and which, with her noble face and figure, distinguished her from all around. She was quite young enough and woman enough to enjoy her little triumph and to be flattered by it; but to any one who has had a full and vivid experience of life and emotion before entering on the round of society existence, the latter will soon seem vapid and empty enough. She could not excite herself over its prizes, and only laughed at Agnes's anxiety to be seen at this house or that, or to secure the presence of certain personages at her own. She wearied of what seemed to her the sameness of the talk, and would laughingly say

to Mrs Earlstoun that she would rather have a good honest argument or quarrel, whichever she liked to call it, with Mr Dallas or some of his friends, or go to some of their East End lectures or meetings, than be asked a dozen times in a night if she were going to the Duchess's, or did she think the Princess would make her appearance. Somehow she did not in the least comprehend the smile with which such assurances were received.

As Mrs Earlstoun learned to know and to love her niece better day by day, she had her own bitter regrets over the past too; but then the past was past. Adair could never be Douglas's wife now; but that was no reason why she should not marry, especially when a man like George Dallas, with everything to recommend him—wealth, position, influence, even kindred interests and pursuits—was very evidently waiting her pleasure. The match was an ideal one—it left nothing to be desired. To Mrs Earlstoun a *good* marriage, in the society sense of the term, was a girl's natural destiny and happiest lot. Shy, silent,

ungainly Alexander Earlstoun had been by no means beautiful Evelyn Daylesford's first love; and had not she had everything woman could wish, and been happy enough, until—until there had come a sudden and terrible need for some solid foundation to rest on beneath the glittering surface of her life, some genuine love and trust on which to lean her weary disappointed heart, she might have said—but at this point she broke her recollections off. Adair would be more fortunate. Dallas was a stronger man than her husband had been. There was no fear of such a gloomy ending to the bright day that seemed dawning for the girl. So Mrs Earlstoun began by every delicate art in her power to promote the little drama that was unfolding before her—stifling her regrets that she could not change the person of the hero, with the growing conviction that it might be well for her son if Adair's destiny were as finally settled as his own. His constant visits made Mrs Earlstoun vaguely uneasy, and the apparent indifference of his manner did not wholly

deceive her. As is usual in such cases, every one in the little circle saw what was going on save the one most concerned. There was certainly nothing of the suitor in Dallas's manner; indeed there were sometimes pretty hot disputes between the two, for Adair had formed her own opinions, and held them strongly. But from time immemorial the world has smiled at a friendship between a young man and a beautiful young woman; and relatives and acquaintances nodded their heads and whispered sagely to each other that it was very plain where *this* friendship was tending.

Returning one afternoon from a drive with Mrs Earlstoun, Adair found, on going up to her room, a great square object done up in green baize. From its shape and size it could be nothing but a picture. But why was it here? Who could possibly have sent her such a thing? She hurriedly undid the fastenings, and threw back the covering from an unfinished canvas. A pale spiritual young face looked out on her with a seeking look in the

dark wistful eyes, a tender wavering smile on the parted lips. *It was Elfie!* Adair sank down trembling before it. Her sister was given back to her for the moment. If “those lips had had language,” it would not have seemed strange to her then. Walls and ceiling, her narrow room, the sky pale and quivering with heat over roofs and chimneys, the roar of the city,—all alike vanished. She was back again in her old life, amid the long cool grass of the orchard, the yellow leaves above were playing in the September sunlight, her child’s voice was in her ears, and boundless hope and possibility still seemed her kingdom by right divine. She sat silent till dusk began to fall, till the pictured face before her grew even more shadowy. The flood-gates of memory were opened, and she let the past flow over her like a stream,—like the cool waters of her own Rule, whose murmur seemed to fill the deepening twilight. It was only when Mrs Earlstoun’s maid knocked at the door that she rose with a start, and noticed for the

first time a note that had evidently accompanied the picture. It was brief enough.

“I do not know whether I should send you this. I cannot tell whether I may be giving you pain or pleasure; but I feel that you ought to have it, if you will. Forgive me if I have done wrong.”

No, he had not done wrong—he had restored a treasure to her, as they will understand who, like her, have concentrated thought and inward vision on a beloved vanished face till memory turns traitor and refuses to obey, or gives only fleeting, baffling glimpses. Now she had Elfie’s face for ever before her in its gentlest, fairest aspect—she could look into those soft eyes without bitterness. The trouble was over, the shadow gone from them. “In Thy light we shall see light”—recalling, as she could now, that supreme moment when out of the opening eternity into which it was passing the pure spirit, fettered no longer, had looked back into her own.

CHAPTER VIII.

ADAIR was bound for a great social function at her sister's house that evening. Agnes, a harmony in pale pink and pearls, was pacing up and down like a restless little peacock, casting anxious glances over her shoulder, her mind divided between her social perplexities and serious misgivings as to the proper fall of her train. She was not usually observant of other people's faces, except so far as their moods might influence her own; but in spite of her preoccupations she noticed at once the dewy light in Adair's eyes. "Can it be all settled? Oh, I hope it is!" was her inward thought; but she believed in keeping her emotions well in hand until some special display of them was called for, and inquired coolly—

“What is the matter, Adair? You look as if you were up in the clouds about something.”

Adair told her briefly; she could never be very expansive with Agnes.

“Oh, is that all!” said Agnes, swallowing her disappointment. After all, though, it was a step in the right direction; and such a trifle as sending her an unfinished picture, that could only have been lumber on his hands for years, would hardly have roused so much gratitude if there had been no warmer feeling beneath it. “Very nice of Mr Dallas to think of it, I am sure, after all this time. He will likely be here to-night—at least he said he might be, but it would be late. I wish you would watch me when I walk, Adair, and tell me how my train sits; I am not at all sure of it. Now do take a real good look; I hate when any one says, Oh, it’s all right, just to ease one’s mind, when you feel pretty sure yourself that it is all wrong. It is very tiresome; it will haunt me all night now.”

“Then it need not, for as far as my limited

vision goes it is perfect. I don't know what you see wrong," said Adair, looking after the important little figure with an air of amused admiration.

"Well, if you are *quite* sure," said Agnes, doubtfully, turning sharply on her heel and watching the effect upon her billowing draperies.

The evening, or rather the next morning, was pretty well advanced, when Adair, feeling more mentally than bodily tired, took refuge in a broad corridor that united two of the rooms, and which was fitted up with great soft divans in cosy nooks amongst groups of broad-leaved foliage-plants. Her hope of escaping for a little was evidently doomed to disappointment, however, for she had hardly sunk down into a shady corner when, looking up, she saw Dallas coming towards her with a sort of doubtful questioning look on his face. Forgetful of everything but of that peaceful hour, while she had looked into Elfie's eyes again, she sprang up, and going up to him in her old impulsive way, put both her hands

into his, exclaiming, "Oh, Mr Dallas!" She could say no more, but the look in her eyes made the three broken words eloquence itself to him. In all his life he had perhaps never had a more exquisite moment than when he held Adair's hands, and saw the rapturous gratitude on her lifted face. True, it was only gratitude yet, but who could tell?—It cost him a considerable effort to inquire, in something like an ordinary voice—

"Then I did right; you cared to have it, such as it is?"

"*Cared!* I cannot tell you what it has been to me. I seemed to have her back again for a little"—in a lowered voice.

"If it has given you any pleasure, I am very glad. I feared it might only awaken the old pain. I will make a full confession, Miss Earlstoun: since I met you I have felt that the picture was yours if you wished it, but I had not the courage to send it sooner. I have had a battle with my conscience; for I was afraid it might not only bring back your grief, but——"

“My prejudice! Oh yes, give it its right name,” said Adair, smiling rather unsteadily. “No, Mr Dallas, that is over—it cannot be revived again.”

“You are in earnest”—eagerly—“and I am acquitted fully and freely?” with a smile.

“The charge was a baseless one, rather,” said Adair, her eyes falling, though she tried to keep up the half-jesting tone. She had forgotten that Dallas was still holding her hands—though whether he was equally oblivious might be questioned. In the soft light the pair made a very striking picture against the dark clump of tropical foliage,—the tall graceful girl, standing with slightly drooped head and averted eyes, and the suppressed excitement in the face and attitude of her companion. To any onlooker it would probably have conveyed the same impression that it appeared to do to a couple of late arrivals, who made a slight involuntary pause on seeing them. Cicely, with her hand lightly laid on Douglas’s arm, felt the sudden thrill

shoot through him. So she was to be avenged after all, she thought, with a little malignant inward laugh : she would not suffer alone now. Aloud she said—

“ I am afraid we are *de trop*. It is cruel to disturb them, is it not? —but really, if people will choose such public places for those tender little passages, what else can they expect? They must be very much absorbed in each other. Why, where are you going, Douglas? We shall find Mrs Mitchell soon enough—not that it matters much whether we do or not. I want to speak to your cousin. I have not seen her since her return to the world—or what shall I call it? I must congratulate her on it, and the happy results that seem likely to follow. You see I was right after all, though I hardly expected my prophecy would be so soon fulfilled. Yes, as you say, she has worn wonderfully well,”—in an appraising tone,—“ but that buxom Juno-like style rather improves with maturity. Distinctly a fine woman, I should pronounce her—a little of the Flemish

school, perhaps. I could imagine Rubens selecting her for one of his portly Venuses; but honestly, I can't see why Clara and her set should rave about her so. To be sure, their standard is not specially high."

It is a common enough expression that one would rather walk up to a loaded cannon than do so-and-so; but Douglas, having had actual experience of the former disagreeable enough alternative, would in all honesty have chosen it again, rather than, in Cicely's company, approach his cousin at that moment. But under such circumstances a man is somewhat helpless; he could hardly detach himself from his wife's hold and walk off, still less could he forcibly drag her away. The traditions of civilised society forbade either course, so he presently had the satisfaction of seeing the two start apart, in mingled surprise and annoyance, as Cicely came up with outstretched hand, exclaiming, "So the Miss Earlstoun I have been hearing so much about lately is really my old acquaintance after all! I meant to make a pilgrimage to Park Street to see

you, but I have so little time, and my husband represents me so well there that really I am not needed. He is a pattern of filial devotion, is he not, Miss Adair?—a virtue almost extinct nowadays. You here too, Mr Dallas! I understood you were so joined to your idols, Parliament and the poor, that you were to be seen nowhere now; but I am glad to see you can occasionally tear yourself away from them, like Miss Adair from her patients. It reminds me of the old days at Earlshope. Possibly you hardly remember them so well as I do; of course it was a very important summer for me,” with a little smile towards Douglas.

“Yes, I remember them very well indeed,” said Adair composedly, though at the sound of those light mocking tones, unheard since that bitter day when they had rent her heart and laid her life in ruins, something of that bygone blackness of darkness which had overwhelmed her then seemed to roll over her again. But with Miss Charteris’s eyes fixed upon her, cold and cruel, like those of some

wild creature remorselessly calculating its spring upon some helpless victim, she would not flinch, and for a second the two looked full at each other, while the men exchanged some commonplace words. As Adair looked at the woman, whom the world would have called her successful rival, pure pity welled up and overflowed every other feeling. Cicely had robbed her of the best that life could hold for her, but what had she gained for herself? Nothing, and less than nothing. The worn expressive face was that of a miserably unhappy, disappointed woman, though the thin lips were curved into their old smile. She had her husband's presence at her side, her hand was on his arm, but they were worlds apart: the real Douglas she had never known, nor could know. And Cicely?—from long habit she had learned to control her features, but sickening envy, corroding jealousy, devoured her heart, as she looked at the fair face of the woman her husband loved. When last they met the power had been in her hands; she had been able to wring this girl's heart, who had

come between her and her desire : now it was she who was helpless, and Adair knew it, and could afford to pity her, reading the girl's look with lightning-quick intuition. She to be pitied ! She flashed a look upon Adair that startled her. For a second malice and hatred undisguised seemed to look out on her, as through the eyeholes of a mask, from those dilating eyes, giving place again instantly to the cold scrutinising smile.

“ You are very much to be envied, Miss Adair, to be only now experiencing all the emotions of a *débutante*. You must feel rather like a nun set loose from a convent, everything must seem so delightfully fresh. I wish I could change places with you ! The pity is that, as a rule, one gets over all one's first impressions before one is old enough to appreciate them.”

“ I do not know if I am to be so greatly envied after all,” said Adair, smiling ; “ it is merely a choice of disenchantments—to have the gilding rubbed off your gingerbread, or to see very well from the first that it is merely

gilding. On the whole, I would think it better to begin with a few illusions."

"Which may last as long as a tulle ball skirt," said Cicely, shrugging her slender shoulders. "Well, better late than never is always a consoling proverb. Really it is quite a relief to a frivolous worldling like myself to find that you very serious people can take a holiday from your good works occasionally. I shall have to readjust my ideas though, as I understood you were coming to Park Street as a sort of *sœur de charité*."

"Miss Earlstoun has such a bent for self-sacrifice that her friends have to interfere in her own behalf occasionally," said Dallas, looking round with a laugh.

"By taking her to the House and charitable excursions all over the East End, Mr Dallas?" laughed Cicely. "One hears about all those things, you see. At any rate," turning to Adair, "I am pleased to find that your presence is not so urgently required as I imagined. Douglas gave me rather a different impression, but then his feelings may

have interfered with his veracity—they sometimes do,” with a glance from Adair to her husband that gave point to the sting.

“Pray, don’t hold me accountable for your impressions, Cicely—that is too wide a responsibility. I am not deeply concerned to defend my veracity against your imagination, which has most to do with them, I fancy,” said Douglas, some ill-concealed annoyance underneath the indifferent tone. “Have you any idea where Agnes is to be found by this time, Adair? Unless we simply wish to say good-night, I think we had better hunt her up.”

“You are remorseless, Douglas, and I have so much to say to Miss Adair about all those old days. We did not imagine then all that was going to happen. It must be a great change for your sister being in Earlshope, after the Old Manse. You see I have not forgotten the name of your house, nor anything else, I think. I have a very good memory,” with a smile. “Ah, well,” with an air of gracefully yielding to Douglas’s manifest impatience, “the first day I have a moment to spare I

am coming to Park Street, and then we can have a good talk ; but we poor actors and actresses never do have any time till now, when most people are beginning to think of home and bed."

Agnes, now serenely speeding her parting guests, was perhaps as thoroughly happy and satisfied a woman as London contained, which is a tolerably wide assertion. Every one had come whom she had specially wanted ; she had heard nothing but compliments on every side, —on her house, her arrangements, her dress, herself. Compliments couched in the very plain language which is now considered good form, and which, though at first they might have somewhat astonished her, she had received, blushing her prettiest pink behind a fan that resembled a mass of loose fluttering rose-leaves. As Douglas and Cicely came up, she was bidding adieu to an elderly lady, remarkable chiefly for the severity of her aspect and the conspicuous shabbiness of her gown. She was making some parting remark, to which her pretty little hostess was listening with rapt

and reverent attention, like a devotee to whom his patron saint has appeared in glory, and vouchsafed some words of celestial counsel.

“Her Grace of Lauderdale!” said Cicely, with a certain amount of respect in her tone. “Your little cousin is to be congratulated. She will get on—no fear of it. She has evidently the true society instinct, wherever she picked it up. The Duchess will regard her as a compatriot, I suppose, and therefore to be patronised. You Scotch people are so clan-nish! Do wait a moment, Douglas; if she sees me she’ll be sure to want me to do something for her,—I know her of old. I don’t want to refuse her, but I can’t take on anything more, not even for half-a-dozen duchesses.”

Agnes turned round to greet the late comers with the air of one making a slight step downwards, something of the ducal atmosphere still enveloping her. All the same she was highly flattered to see Cicely, whose presence was courted in houses where she was still struggling to obtain a footing.

“We are shockingly late, Mrs Mitchell,” said Cicely, who elected to be extremely cordial; “but you must remember my evening only begins at midnight, and I had two or three other engagements to work off before I could get here, but I was *quite* determined not to miss you. Really, I think time has been standing still with you good people. I have been speaking to your sister—she has got a good deal stouter, has she not? But you are exactly what I remember you at Earlshope. Dear old place! If I am at Canonbie this autumn, I must get Lady Warriston to take me over. May I inflict myself on you for an afternoon?”

“An afternoon! Oh, I hope you will be able to spare us a day or two at least,” said Agnes, in a little flutter of importance. “Mr Mitchell has been making some improvements, or rather he says it is *I* who have been doing so, but we expect everything to be ready by August. Of course that is a long way off yet, but we should be charmed if you can include Earlshope among your engagements.”

"Nothing I should like better," said Cicely, promptly. Douglas smiled rather oddly, but said nothing. So that parchment-faced old fellow and little Aggie were making improvements at Earlshope, and he was being invited to see the changes in the old home that would never likely be his again! Pleasant, certainly, he said grimly to himself.

"*Apropos* of your sister, I have it on my conscience that I disturbed a very important little *tête-à-tête* just now. Am I to congratulate her, Mrs Mitchell? Really, it looks very like it."

"Oh, we don't talk of it yet," said Agnes, with an "I could an' if I would" air. She longed to be able to say something more definite, and let Miss Charteris—and Douglas too—see that Adair, in place of being heart-broken, as they had probably imagined, was about to make a match of which any one might be proud.

"That means it is understood, I suppose," said Cicely. "Very well understood, I should think," with a laugh. "Poor Mr Dallas! I

am sure he deserves to be rewarded, if only for his constancy. There are not many men whose feelings will stand the wear and tear of five years—for I am sure it must be that, if not more. Five weeks is a respectable duration for most modern passions, while five months is patriarchal. You must let me indulge myself in saying ‘I told you so,’ for I always felt sure that Miss Adair was the attraction, although Mr Dallas made a great pet of your youngest sister, poor thing, that summer. Dear me, what ages ago it seems!”

“Yes, he painted a very charming picture of poor Elfie. Adair tells me that he sent it to her to-day,” said Agnes, not at all averse to having something tangible to tell.

“Really? How very nice! Now, Mrs Mitchell, you must be quite sure to tell me at once when things are settled, as I suppose they will be very soon. I am sure I should be delighted to hear it. I, for one, am always sorry to hear of nice-looking girls taking to nursing,—somehow one is apt to think there must be some other motive than pure phil-

anthropy. But I am keeping you from all your other guests," and Cicely walked away, suavely smiling.

"Honestly, I am quite pleased to think that your cousin is likely to console herself at last, poor girl! Come, confess, Douglas—is it not a weight off your mind too? You would not like to feel that you had permanently blighted her young affections. They seem to be sprouting again most healthily."

Douglas looked round. It is a mistake to imagine that it is only dark eyes that can flash with passion. "It is possible to carry your experiments on my patience a little too far, Cicely," he said in a suppressed voice. "I suppose it is quite needless for me to repeat that you are under some extraordinary mistake about my cousin, but I do not choose to hear either her or any other woman talked of in that fashion. It is no wonder that men have so little respect for women, when you are so merciless to one another."

"I am to consider myself rebuked, I suppose," said Cicely, with an injured little *moue*.

“ Really, it is a sort of breaking a butterfly to treat my little joke *au sérieux* in that fashion. After this, I suppose I need not ask your highness to come with me to Mrs Kingston’s? I really ought to go there.” One or two people were watching “the celebrated Miss Charteris,” so it was quite worth while wasting a fascinating smile on Douglas, though he was not looking at her.

“ Oh, hang it all, Cicely, I can’t stand any more to-night!” he exclaimed, his patience giving way. “ I beg your pardon ; but if you have no mercy on yourself, have some on me. I am tired to death for one, and so are you, I am sure, if you would admit it. What pleasure on earth can it be to you to climb another stair, and shake a few more hands, and keep up a grin for another hour? For pity’s sake leave Mrs What’s-her-name for another night, or else I am afraid I must leave you.”

CHAPTER IX.

“WHERE are you going yourself this autumn, Douglas?”

“I haven’t thought of it yet. Nowhere that I know of, unless some good Samaritan asks me for some shooting. My respected brother-in-law, and cousin-in-law if there is such a term, have both invited me, but I am not inclined to go there.”

“You are not going north with Cicely then?”

“Ye gods, no! Come, mother, don’t I deserve a holiday? I am lost in admiration of my own dutiful conduct, if no other one has observed it. I am rather disappointed, for I expected to be complimented on it. I have been trotting about with her everywhere, like a dog on a string, and I think I have earned my freedom now. I thought, too, I had earned

an invitation to Haslemere, after all my journeyings to and fro, and bullying of house-agents,—but it does not seem forthcoming. You are not too hospitable to your son, mother, and in a week or two I shall be as homeless as any Macgregor. Now, mother, aren't you going to ask me?" with his old coaxing smile. "Oh, it would be *such* a rest!"

Mrs Earlstoun was not given to tears, but her eyes suddenly filled. "Douglas, my dear boy," she said, a little unsteadily, "I am going to ask you *not* to come to Haslemere; and until we go, not to come so often here."

"Why not?"

"You do not need me to tell you why, Douglas."

"I am not pretending to misunderstand you, mother,—I know what you mean well enough; but why should I not come? What harm does it do? If you think my coming or going is of any consequence to Adair, you are very much mistaken."

Mrs Earlstoun was silent. She was very

much afraid that she was not mistaken, but she could not plead that as a reason with Douglas.

"I think it would be wiser for yourself, Douglas," she said in a low voice.

"It does not matter much for me,—I am quite willing to take the risk. Don't worry yourself over me and my affairs, mother—they are past praying for."

"Is it fair to Cicely, Douglas? Think of your wife."

"I am not likely to be allowed to forget her," with a short laugh. He rose and walked to the window, and then came back, and stood looking at the ferns that filled the empty fireplace. "I have no right to complain, God knows!" he said abruptly, "but I can't tell you what my life has been of late. I think I have only lived through one day after another for the prospect of coming here for a little. We can never be anything to each other on earth again: she has the very good sense not to care for me now, but all the same, I would give every hope I have for this world or the

next, though that is not saying much, only to see her face, only to hear her speak. There will be no more chance of that when she is Mrs Dallas ; why should you grudge it to me now ? ”

“ Oh, Douglas, is it as bad as that ? I was afraid—— ”

“ Yes, it is as bad as that, or as good as that, whichever you like to call it. I sometimes think it is the only good that is left in me now.”

He spoke in a hard, dull, almost matter-of-fact tone. There was a moment's silence while Mrs Earlstoun lay back in her chair, watching him with anxious eyes.

“ Don't think me hard, Douglas ; it is not because I do not feel for you,” she said, almost timidly ; “ but if Adair can bring her mind to it, would it not be the best thing for her to—— ? ”

“ To marry Dallas ? Of course it would. I quite admit his many perfections. I cannot tell why she did not discover years ago that he was the better man of the two. I do not see why she should have any difficulty in bringing her

mind, as you say, to such a very desirable arrangement." He paused, and then, with not a very pleasant laugh, said, "Is it possible that you fancy that my coming here may in any way hinder a consummation so devoutly to be wished for as a good marriage for a girl? In that case I shall efface myself at once—any sacrifice for such an end. Forgive me, mother," his voice changing at the look on her face. "I know perfectly well that that is not your reason. You are quite right. I ought not to be here, and I have known it for a while, though I would not admit it. I have come just because I could not help it. It is time I was away, for the fight is getting too much for me," in a hopeless sort of voice. After a moment he looked round—"It is no small sacrifice you ask, mother; do me the justice to believe that it has not been wholly on her account I have come here. You don't mean to banish me altogether?" with an attempt at a smile. "You will let me come and see you, surely, some time like to-day, when—when she is not with you?"

“And what do you think it is to me, Douglas?” said Mrs Earlstoun, with sudden vehemence. “You are all I have. I begged you to stay for my sake once, and I bid you leave me now. Do you think I would do that if I did not feel it must be—for your own sake, for your wife, for Ad—for us all? I could not send Adair away now; she has promised to stay with me till——” Her look filled up the blank.

“For God’s sake, mother, don’t hint even at such a thing!” exclaimed Douglas, almost roughly. “It cannot be, it *must* not be. You have been looking so much better. I am sure it is only this stifling weather that is knocking you up, and no wonder. I only wish you could have got away sooner; you are needing a change, that is it. Wait till you get a good breath of fresh air coming down off the heather,—for there is heather there, and beautiful heather too—and you will feel as if you had got new life. You have been too long in this choky hole. And here have I been worrying you over my miserable concerns into the bargain! Why did you not speak to

me sooner, since I was too blind, or too selfish rather, to see it for myself? I wonder where mothers get their patience! Are you sure everything is being done?" he went on anxiously. "I will bring Paget to see you again before you go."

"There is no need, Douglas," said Mrs Earlstoun, putting her hand on his, and smiling faintly. He laid his other hand on it gently, and then looked up at her with a slight start, as he felt how loose the heavy rings were on the slender fingers.

"Mother, it can't be—*you* will not leave me! I am *afraid* to think of my life without you. Tell me it is not true," he said huskily, looking in her face with piteous entreating eyes.

Poor Mrs Earlstoun! it was perhaps no wonder that her courage failed her. Left alone for once with Douglas, she had determined to tell him, what she felt he ought to know—that she had received her sentence. At her own urgent request, the courtly doctor had told her that there could be but one ending to her illness,—it might be soon, or it

might be weeks or even months off yet. But with her son's eyes fixed on hers, the words would not come. After all, why should she grieve him sooner than need be? He had quite enough to bear for the present without the weight of coming trouble being added to it. So she made some evasive answer, tried to allay the anxiety she had awakened, and roused herself to talk about Haslemere and the little journey there, till Douglas went away, only half satisfied, but trying hard to persuade himself that his worst fears were groundless. It *could not* be, he said to himself, with that passionate refusal to acknowledge the inevitable even when it is thrust under our eyes, until at last it becomes the actual and we are crushed before it. It was only the weather, he repeated: he was strong enough and yet he felt good for nothing; no wonder that his mother was worn out by it. Douglas had some ground for his assertion, for the day was a typical August one in town—airless, breathless, and hot, with a heavy stifling heat, though the sun was veiled—more

oppressive than the fiercest blaze of sunshine. Streets and pavements, walls and houses, seemed to have been baked through and through, and to be slowly giving out the heat they had been absorbing for days. Poor muzzled dogs slunk along, lifting beseeching eyes to every passer-by, as if they dumbly implored to be relieved—to be allowed to stretch their parched jaws and loll out their poor fevered tongues, at least. The season was at its last gasp, as every one and everything seemed to be. The lingering throes of a prolonged session alone kept up some semblance of life. Carriages were growing fewer day by day, faces looked languid, toilets limp; both, like the trees, had lost their first freshness. To any one untutored in Western ways—to those suave Eastern envoys who view our doings with impassive outward courtesy but secret scorn and amazement—the Park on such a day must appear a species of public penance, as the string of carriages with their listless occupants go grinding up and down, up and down, in the hot dust. That such a

task should be voluntarily undertaken, still less that it should be conventionally ranked as an amusement, would probably never occur to the savage mind. Dust was everywhere : one tasted it, smelt it, handled it on everything. It coated the dry sickly-looking grass, and powdered the leaves no longer fresh and dancing, but faded to a dull uniform blackish-green, and hanging sere and shrivelled, ready to be swept down by the first blast of wind. Though the all-conquering spring can invade the city, and pepper the most smoke-begrimed bush or trunk with vivid green buds, autumn's magic wand has but little power, and the leaves only droop and blacken to their fall, instead of out-braving decay and kindling the funeral pyre of the year in a blaze of orange and crimson, yellow and red. On such a day, when one is trailing leaden feet wearily along the heated pavements, how one dreams of waves breaking with a cool clear splash on sand or shingle, or of the warm dry scent of heather as the pollen rises from its purple bloom in clouds at every plunging step.

Such visions awaken longings as sickening in their intensity, as dreams of Paradise to the souls toiling up the steep slopes of the Mountain of Purgatory. It was not, however, of the wide moors at the Water-head, through which tiny streams come oozing down to feed the infant Rule, nor of the rolling expanse of hills, free and boundless to all seeming as the stainless sky above, that Douglas was thinking now, though he had had dreams of them often enough. He presently left the Drive behind him, and walking northward a little, sat down on the first bench he came to, and began absently drawing lines and circles in the dust at his feet.

Yes, his mother was right,—it was time he was gone, or some day or other, at some unguarded moment, the old passion would break out, only to cause shame and suffering, as it had done once before, and to shock Adair probably beyond forgiveness. She had cured herself, apparently—had left the old life and the old love behind for a better and brighter one; why could not he?—a question to which

there was no answer. He could not, and that was the end of it. At that very moment, with the promise newly uttered that he would not voluntarily see her again, he knew that he was hungering for the sound of her voice, for one more look into her face. Bitter, sullen resentment, impotent revolt against his lot, filled his heart, while he sat so still that some sooty little sparrows were emboldened to come near and squabble over the crumbs left scattered by some nursemaid and her flock. To be sure, it was all his own fault, but it was surely a pretty heavy punishment for a brief folly—a punishment that was growing greater than he could bear. Through those hot summer weeks his life had been simply one long misery, with the strife within and Cicely's jealous passion. Whether jealousy had quickened her perceptions, she had no belief herself in the approaching engagement between Adair and Dallas of which she so confidently spoke, but she found it a convenient means of tormenting her husband, the one point on which her petty malice

was not balked by his usual indifference. With this, and her jealous suspicion and reproaches, she goaded him to utter desperation at times.

Well, he had lived without Adair before, if it could be called living, and he must learn to do it again. Her marriage with Dallas could not separate her further from him than she was now, and it was a modest demand truly, he said to himself with savage self-irony, that because he had done his best to spoil her life, he should expect her to waste the whole of it for his sake. He rose suddenly, putting the sparrows to flight, but he had scarcely gone a few paces when he saw Adair herself coming towards him across the dusty grass. She was walking slowly, her eyes on the ground, a listless droop about her whole figure. When she looked up and saw her cousin, she threw a quick involuntary glance round, as if seeking for some possibility of escape. To Douglas it seemed as if there was an expression of absolute fear on her face, a look that stung him to the quick. Was it

not enough that she should deliberately avoid him as she had done of late, and again to-day, but had it come to this that she could not trust him? Had he sunk so low as that in her esteem?

“What a dreadful day!” she said, giving him her hand with rather a wavering smile.

“Yes, it reminds me of our old Scotch saying that you must have been ‘het at hame’ to leave the house to-day.”

“That was my very reason, because I was so hot. I thought I might get a little air here—the house and the street seemed to suffocate me; but I must confess I have not gained much by it,”—with a glance round at the pale-greyish expanse of grass, at the distant trees like black woolly masses against the hot yellowish haze that hung so heavily over them. “What a relief it will be to get away!”

“I have not the least doubt you will find it so,” with emphasis.

“Haslemere is a very pretty place, is it not?” declining to notice the significance of his tone.

"Very pretty, indeed."

"Even when seen by Scotch eyes?"

"I, at least, thought it very charming, though I have still patriotism or prejudice enough left to think that no place comes up to the Rule Water and our own glen. After this, however, I daresay any place that was green and clean and quiet would seem a paradise. I should be very well content to take up my abode there for a while."

"Do you not intend to do so, then?"

"No; I shall go farther afield, though whether east or west, north or south, I don't know yet."

If his fancy had been at work before, this time there could be no doubt. A look of relief, distinct and unmistakable, crossed her face for a second.

"Aunt Evelyn will miss you very much," said Adair, looking away.

"*She* may, possibly. I suppose one ought to be very thankful in this world to have even one person to whom one's doings are of any consequence. No doubt it is instruc-

tive and wholesome, and so forth, but it is rather humiliating too, to find how thoroughly and comfortably, as a rule, one can be done without."

It was not to be supposed Adair would miss him, but was it needful to give such point to her indifference?

"I am afraid you may find it a little dull," he said, as Adair did not speak. "You will rather miss your philanthropic dissipations. There don't seem to be any poor about,—not of that class, at least, which has apparently been created by a kind Providence as an outlet for the superfluous energies of their betters, and who are to be reformed and instructed and elevated whether they will or no. I sometimes wonder how we would feel if some other class in the community should start a crusade for our forcible improvement."

"There is nothing easier than to sneer," said Adair, hotly. "I would rather try to do something, though I failed."

"Failure is lamentably easy too,—that is my experience, at least."

"But to fail, and yet to fight on!" her eyes kindling.

"Too strenuous an ideal for hot weather. It is easily seen who has been your guide, philosopher, and friend of late. Dallas is for ever conjugating some frightfully active verb. Like you, he believes in 'doing something.' The something, I find, is generally rather vague, but the *doing* seems the all-important matter."

"I had rather do anything than do nothing," retorted Adair.

"That is one for me, I suppose," said Douglas, imperturbably. "Yes, I confess I had rather *flâner* than fuss. After all, a little abstention from the beer-shop, or a few yawning visits from Bill Sykes and the Missis to pictures or lectures that are so much Greek to them, seem scarcely a sufficient reason for the ferment made about them."

"You are not fair to Mr Dallas, nor to what he is trying to do."

"Of course I have not your opportunities of hearing all about his plans and his *doings*.

That word is getting a sort of nightmare, but he is very fortunate to have such a champion."

"He has no need of a champion; but I do not care to hear any one whom I like and —and admire," —the honest eyes aglow, — "spoken of in a slighting way; and if you knew him as I do, you would not do it," said Adair, provoked by Douglas's tone into saying more than she had intended.

"That, of course, is hardly possible," bitterly. "I can only say again that Dallas is very fortunate; and since you have so kindly made me aware of your feelings towards him, you may be sure I shall not offend again."

"Pray do not come any farther," said Adair, pausing suddenly. They had been walking slowly homeward side by side. She was annoyed with herself for having said so much; but why should she let even Douglas speak heedlessly of an absent friend? "I can go home myself; I need not take you farther out of your way."

"Since my way is apparently a very bad one in your opinion, if you ever waste a thought upon it or me either, that is, don't you think it would be a charity to take me out of it? Must one be a hawker or a coal-heaver to awaken the sympathies of you very good people. Here is a case—that is the word, isn't it?—ready to your hand. Since you disapprove so thoroughly of my general good-for-nothingness, cannot you set me *doing* something too?" with a tuneless laugh.

Adair walked on in silence.

"Is my case a hopeless one, then, Adair?" said Douglas after a moment, his voice changing from the careless jesting tone that so often jarred upon Adair, to a swift sudden appeal that gave a new meaning to the few words.

"I am afraid yours is a case in which the patient must minister to himself," said Adair, steadily.

"Is that all? You throw me back on a sorry physician, then—one who has failed already." He would fain have detained her if

he could—they were all but at the Corner—but Adair quickened her pace.

“You give me up, then, Adair?” How could he tell that he was torturing the girl beside him, when she answered quietly, “Yes, like an honest physician who knows that he can do *nothing*”?

Douglas said no more. As they stood together for a second, waiting to cross the Drive, a victoria passed, driving quickly. Some one bent forward eagerly to nod and smile—it was Clara; but Cicely, seated beside her, gave one glance and then looked straight before her.

CHAPTER X.

“I SHALL have a pretty scene with Cicely for this,” Douglas said to himself, with a shrug, at sight of his wife’s face; and on reaching home he was rather relieved to hear from Cicely’s maid that her mistress was lying down. The utter unloveliness of his domestic existence, the incessant wrangles which Cicely forced upon him, had never seemed more distasteful to him than they did to-night. He would rather not see her, he felt. At the bottom of his mind was a half-formed dread that if she were in one of her excited moods, as was only too likely, he might lose hold of himself too; he was in no state to meet her frantic reproaches or entreaties with even outward coolness.

He had dressed, and was about to leave

the house again, when he turned into a little den known as the smoking-room, though people smoked anywhere and everywhere in that house. He was hunting about on the mantelpiece for his cigar-case, when the door was flung open, and Cicely came hurriedly in, with a loose dressing-gown thrown round her, and her dark hair pushed carelessly back from her haggard face.

“Do you want to drive me mad, Douglas?” she said hoarsely.

“No,” said Douglas, turning round and surveying her. Poor woman, she was no pleasant spectacle; and in the midst of her tempest of feeling, she perhaps read this in her husband’s face. “I think it is the other way about, rather. Don’t excite yourself—there is no need for it, I assure you; you won’t be fit for to-night if you do.”

Douglas certainly did not intend it, but if there is one form of aggravation more skilful and subtle than another, it is to tell any one already mastered by passion not to excite himself. Cicely’s self-control, feeble enough

at the best, gave way, and she broke out into a flood of wild accusations, the coarse ravings of a violent jealous nature. Douglas could not know that much of it was pure nervous irritation, that beyond a certain point she was literally unable to restrain herself. For weeks past every nerve had been overstrained; she had been living on excitement, draining her physical strength not only by the nightly playing of an exhausting part, and by feverish pleasure-seeking afterwards, but by ceaseless tormenting suspicion and hate. Nature was exacting her penalty at last. The reins once given to her passion, Cicely was not wholly responsible for all she said; she could not check the outpouring of words and thoughts which in saner moments she might well have been ashamed to utter,—words that seemed to blacken the very air—a self-revelation that filled Douglas with a sort of horrified disgust as he stood listening, all he could do for a time.

“Stop!” he said at last, in a voice that

compelled her to pause; the whirlwind was wearing itself out. "Such things are neither fit for you to say nor for me to hear, Cicely. I suppose all this is the result of your having seen me with my cousin in the Park to-day. I don't see that I am called on to give any explanation of such a simple thing: however, since you have thought fit to make such a storm over it, I assure you, though very likely you will not believe me, that it was by the merest chance I did meet her, and if it is any pleasure for you to hear it, she was quite as unwilling to be even that short time in my company as you could possibly be to see her in it. Will that satisfy you?"—the bitterness of the afternoon surging up again. Cicely stood silent, pressing her hand to her throat, her breath coming in thick short gasps. "Since you can believe such things of me, however," he went on, "I think the best thing I can do is to relieve you of my presence altogether. I cannot promise to do it to-morrow, but I shall as soon as I can."

"What do you mean?" asked Cicely, in a changed startled voice.

"What I say, which is surely plain enough. We cannot go on as we are doing. If you can bear it, I cannot. It will make a brute or a devil of me before long, if it has not done so already, and I do not choose to run the risk any longer."

"You cannot mean it, Douglas! You will not leave me—you could not be so cruel!" cried Cicely, with that swift and total change of mood which was always so incomprehensible to her husband. "If I were cold and indifferent like you, I would not care; it is because I love you that I suffer so."

"Love!" said Douglas, with a groan of impatience. After what he had heard, it seemed a profanation of the word. "If the opinion you seem to have of me is the result of *love*, I should be very glad if you loved me a little less. I should prefer a little peace and a little common-sense, for my part. Are you the only one who suffers? Has my life been much pleasanter of late?"

What do you think it is to me to hear my wife say of me what you said a little ago? I am willing to believe you hardly knew what you were saying, but I cannot and I will not hear it again. We are not a boy and girl any longer to be talking of love. We married each other with our eyes very wide open; I hid nothing from you then. I am sorry you force me to remind you of that, but you have no more reason to doubt me now than you had then. Is it not possible for us to live in some kind of ordinary trust and friendliness together? I, at least, am ready and willing to do my part."

More Douglas could not say; even to say so much cost him an unspeakable effort. He was conscious only of a sense of complete repulsion, moral as well as mental and physical, from this woman who was his wife. Still she was his wife, and he had never been able to give her a wife's due, though it had been her own choice to accept the shadow for the substance. But Cicely was beyond the reach of temperate words. The storm, which had lulled

for a little, broke out again—this time in appeals and protestations as frenzied and extravagant as her accusations had been, till Douglas, to whom the one seemed as hollow and unreal as the other, could bear it no longer, and said coldly—

“Are you rehearsing a new effect for to-night, Cicely? I should think it would go down with the gallery. A little exaggeration never comes amiss there.”

“I think I hate you,” said Cicely in a low voice, darting out of the room.

It was a cruel speech ; but Douglas was too sore and unhappy to have much command over his words, and he was completely wearied out. He had done all he could, he said, as he left the house, all the evil in his nature roused, as Cicely had only too much power to do, though for the moment a hard indifference was the uppermost feeling. From force of habit he went back into town, careless what he did or where he went. After all, it did not matter much to himself or to any other one ; Adair’s last words, “I can do *nothing*,”

mingling with Cicely's, as he was driven townward in the dim hot twilight, through which the lamps as yet showed only like faint tongues of yellow light.

A little later Douglas was leaving his club, when a hansom dashed up, and some one, rushing hastily up the steps, tripped and fell heavily against him.

"Holloa, Maxwell ! hit one of your own size the next time, old man," said Douglas, recognising his brother-in-law, as he caught the little man by the arm and set him on his feet. "What's up to-night ? The affairs of the nation are surely unusually pressing."

"It is you, Earlstoun ! That is fortunate," said Sir Claud, as soon as he had recovered breath. "Have you anything important to do to-night ?"

"No," said Douglas ; "I leave important matters to you. I can't flatter myself that any of my doings come under that head."

"Seriously, though, if you have no special engagement, you would do me an immense favour if you could accompany Lady Maxwell

and your cousin Miss Earlstoun to the theatre to-night. I promised to go with them, and they will be waiting for me already, but I must be in my place—I can't possibly leave the House. I was about to send a telegram ; but if you could go, it would be so much better. Take my hansom, and I shall get another, though I haven't five minutes to spare, really." Panting with haste and importance, Sir Claud, while he spoke, was hustling Douglas down the steps, and the latter found himself in the hansom before he had time to make any inquiries or objections. He was not any more inclined to sacrifice personal comfort without adequate cause shown than other men ; and it is to be feared that if Sir Claud had urged him to accompany Isabel only, to some unspecified theatre on a sweltering August night, the chances were that Lady Maxwell would have spent her evening at home. Had it only been for her sake, the conventional "wild horses," much less Sir Claud's persuasions, would hardly have dragged him there ; but, luckily for his own ends, Sir Claud

had made use of a talisman of whose potency he was quite unaware. Those four words, "Your cousin Miss Earlstoun," had made all the difference. Douglas made no attempt to deny it to himself—that inward tribunal before which we pose even more carefully than before the world without, and for whose benefit so many excuses and explanations are invented—nor to feign unconsciousness of the quick up-leaping of some feeling which was neither hope nor joy nor satisfaction. This last chance had come to him—he had not sought it. For two hours he would sit by Adair's side and see her face. And afterwards? He need not think of that meantime. "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die."

A carriage was standing at the door when he reached Grosvenor Place, and in the half-lighted drawing-room two dim figures were waiting, one sitting very still, the other prancing up and down with every sign of impatience.

"Is that you at last, Claud? We shall be frightfully late!" exclaimed the prancing figure as he came in, in a tone that explained Sir

Claud's nervous haste in getting his substitute promptly despatched.

"Claud, like the Laird o' Cockpen, 'is ta'en up wi' the things o' the State,' but he has sent me to look after you, if you will put up with my escort, Isabel. The unemployed are not without their uses, you see, Adair," with a laugh.

"Don't let us waste any more time," said Isabel, sailing off, and leaving the others to follow.

"Where are we going?" asked Douglas, when they had driven off. "I am affording a fine example of blind faith. I had no time to ask Maxwell; and even if I had, he was in too hot haste to answer me. I hope you good people know what you are letting yourselves in for. Unless we are going to some place where they have electric light, our sufferings will rival those of the early Christians. They had a pleasant fashion, I believe, of baking them alive in ovens, merely as a variation from the more ordinary methods; and I think we shall be able to realise their feelings pretty accurately to-night."

"We are going to hear Cicely, of course," said Isabel.

"What!" ejaculated Douglas.

"Oh, I forgot you have rather a prejudice against her acting; but I thought you had got rid of that old-fashioned idea. She is really wonderful, and when I heard that Adair had never seen her, we arranged to go to-night. It is almost the last chance, and it would be absurd to leave town without seeing her. It always strikes me as so odd that you, of all people, should have retained such puritanic notions on the subject," said Isabel, with her most superior air.

"I am afraid it is the only relic of puritanism left me; perhaps I pet it accordingly," said Douglas, with outward carelessness. It was too late to draw back now; but why had he not asked Maxwell? The prospect was hateful to him, and all the more so after that afternoon's experience; but he was thinking less of himself than of Cicely. What could she think when she saw him there, after all his persistent refusals, and with Adair too? It would give the lie to all his assurances. To her

it would seem a deliberately planned insult, and it would be totally impossible to explain to her, still more to get her to believe, how naturally it had come about, how involuntarily on his part. Well, he could not help it. His face and his heart hardened again, as like a poisonous gust some of her words swept across his mind, blighting better feelings. She had always been insisting on his presence; she might take what satisfaction she could from it to-night.

As Isabel had said, they were very late, and had to make their way to their seats in one of the rows of stalls near the stage, over the toes and skirts of their more punctual neighbours—a progress accompanied by a running fire of smothered apologies on the one hand and ill-suppressed growls of disapprobation on the other. By the time they had reached their seats every glass in the house was fixed upon them for the moment, instead of on the stage. The audience was rather of the nature of a mixed multitude; the society element was fast disappearing, and that curi-

ous provincial one which elects, for unknown reasons, to "do" London in August and September was taking its place. Still there were many present to whom the trio was familiar, and there were plenty of comments exchanged on Douglas's presence there, and on the prospects of "the Earlstoun girl's" expected marriage.

If anything could have added to Douglas's vexation, it was to find himself seated next Lord Dunscombe. His scowl of indignation at the little disturbance their entrance caused, and the rapt admiration that succeeded it, on his rather vacant young face, seemed to Douglas only too faithful a transcript of his own bygone folly. He had been no wiser in his day than that young idiot, as he very uncharitably called him. He had been spellbound too. Good heavens! where had the glamour lain? Douglas was no more of a purist than other men in theatrical matters; but to-night the play revolted him, though under any other circumstances he would probably have seen nothing amiss with it. The play was one of a class

which is common enough at present, and in which Cicely had made her mark at first—the heroine an adventuress, who, by a series of unscrupulous manœuvres, wins the love and becomes the wife of an honourable man, whom she had merely intended should be her dupe. Ere long the inevitable accomplice, who is possessed of all the secrets of her past life, turns up, and after desperate attempts to conceal the truth, rather than confess her shame to her supposed husband she poisons herself, racked between the dread of death or the agony of living to endure her husband's scorn. Of the power of Cicely's impersonation there could be no question. Her cool daring and charming audacity, and the sudden exquisite moments of tenderness which seemed even to surprise herself in the earlier scenes—the vain struggles of the unhappy woman round whom the net is closing, and the last long agony, when she is driven on to the death from which she shrinks in terror—won the breathless sympathy of all for an unlovely character enough. But of all this Douglas could see nothing. He had no love for Cicely to be wounded, but his pride

suffered a martyrdom. Probably in this respect he was, as Isabel had said, old-fashioned in his ideas ; but as he sat looking on, he was filled with a sense of suffocating shame for himself and for her. And that was his wife, that painted creature, in another man's arms, playing the part of an abandoned woman before all these gazers ! Faugh ! a shudder of absolute physical aversion shook his strong frame.

The contrast was too cruel when he turned his eyes from the stage to the woman at his side : to him it was like emerging from some heated noisy revel into the calm peace, the dewy hush of a moonlit night. He might look his fill at the clear strong outline of her slightly averted face, at the fair soft curves of cheek and throat which he knew so well. For the moment Adair had forgotten both herself and him ; she was wholly absorbed in the deepening tragedy before her, — the forlorn woman struggling helplessly against the fate she had prepared for herself. The curtain fell at the close of the act amid a tempest of applause. Douglas sat with clenched hands when Cicely appeared. Her wonderful

eyes were alight with consuming excitement as she gazed slowly round the crowded house, seeming to include every one in that gracious smile and sweeping stage curtsey. Adair, brought back to reality, drew a long shivering breath, and turned towards him, like one waking out of a dream, in an involuntary appeal for kindred sympathy. She was startled at the expression on his face, although she could not read its meaning. Lord Dunscombe flung a haystack of flowers, which he had been sedulously nursing all evening, on to the stage. Happily he could not know what a relief it would have been to Douglas if he could have pitched him after them. If only he could get away from this gaudy hateful place, from this glare of gaslight and gilding, where the crash of the orchestra and the thunders of applause seemed only to blare abroad his misery, and beat it in upon his brain. Lord Dunscombe, thinking himself in duty bound to unburden himself of a portion of his raptures to *her* husband, received a reply almost savage in its curttness.

“He’s a perfect brute ! I wonder she puts up with him,” mentally ejaculated the enamoured youth, unaccustomed to the snub direct, and glaring defiance at the broad shoulders of his divinity’s thankless possessor.

“What has the poor boy done, that you should be so ferocious to him ?” said Adair, with a smile. “Is admiration wholly forbidden, or is it his compliments only that you object to ? I tremble to think that his fate might have been mine ; but even in view of it I must, for my own relief, say that it is wonderful—very wonderful,” with a sigh of overcharged feeling.

“Don’t !” said Douglas sharply, such a world of pain in the single monosyllable that Adair was silenced. The interval seemed a long one. Lady Maxwell, who preferred the exercise of her own voice to any other form of entertainment, and regarded play or concert as rather an interruption than otherwise, had plunged immediately on the fall of the curtain into a stream of talk with her next neighbour. Douglas sat looking straight before him, a

heavy frown on his face. Isolated between the two, Adair, who had for a little forgotten the woman in the actress, began dimly to realise what he was feeling, though she could not dream what it was to Douglas to hear Cicely's praises from her lips. She dare not utter a word of the pity with which her heart was aching, but after a time she stole one quick timid glance round and saw, instead of the gloomy averted profile, the troubled grey eyes fixed full on her.

"Forgive me, Adair," he said in a broken whisper, under cover of the gay chatter around. "When I could speak so to you, you may know that I am not myself; but hell itself, if there can be a worse one than the present life, can hold no sorer punishment than for a man simply to be filled with the fruits of his own doings, as I am to-night." He spoke with such concentrated passion and bitterness that it chilled Adair's very blood. There was no time for more. The curtain rose for the final scene, and the babel of voices around sank into silence.

CHAPTER XI.

DOUGLAS'S surmises as to Cicely's feelings on seeing him come in with his cousin and sister were only too correct, but he was wholly unable to conceive of the depth of the passion it aroused, simply because to him her swiftly succeeding emotions appeared no more lasting or genuine than her heart-shaking anguish on which the curtain had but a little ago fallen. If it be true of the natural objects around us that we never see them in reality, but simply their images reflected from the brain, it is far more true of the human lives with which we are brought into daily contact. We dwell in a world of shadows, and it is not the husband or wife, the brother or sister, the man or woman, as they are, whom we see, but the idea of them we have formed in our own

minds, fitting in their words and doings to suit it, instead of making any effort to learn the truth of our conception. It was perhaps little wonder that Cicely's spasmodic displays of affection, or desire for it rather, should have become a mere weariness of the flesh to her husband. If Douglas could but once have realised that the feeling which prompted them was real, however it might differ from his own conception of love, it might have altered his opinion of her,—certainly it would have made him more merciful to her that afternoon. But this key to the tissue of uncontrolled desires and emotions which was Cicely's character he had always lacked.

For one second, a pause so brief that it passed unnoticed, the words died on her lips, when she saw that the tall fair man following Adair Earlstoun to her seat was none other than Douglas. He had done it to punish her; he had turned her often passionately expressed wish into a weapon against her. He had chosen the moment when she was helpless to resent it, or escape from it, to

parade her successful rival before her. It was cowardly, it was cruel, and he was as false as he was cruel. He had stood before her that afternoon and coldly beat down her misery with the assurance that she had no cause to doubt him : no cause ? she knew better. She knew how he could love ; was it likely he would be satisfied with those cold formal meetings in his mother's presence that she had interrupted more than once ? No, indeed ; she would as soon believe that his presence before her to-night was a chance, as that his meeting with Adair that day had been accidental. But why go on ? that grim description of the human heart as a "cage of unclean birds" would have been an apt enough emblem of the poor maddened woman's, with every base suspicion and torturing suggestion of frantic jealousy stirring within her, as she looked at the two faces. They were so near her that she could see every change of expression. She watched the white set look of aversion fix and deepen on her husband's face, and at last saw him turn away his

eyes as if for relief to Adair. She could note the slightest whisper or gesture of either, and all the time, with the dual nature and consciousness of an artist, she was transmuting the devouring inward excitement into an even more vivid and thrilling rendering of her part, till at the close of the act the verdict of the *habitués* was, "Cis Charteris has beaten her record," "Better than Sarah, if you ask me,"—Adair was but one of hundreds wholly rapt away in sympathy and wonder. Taste and judgment were alike subjugated for the moment by the supreme compelling power of the presentment.

"Give me some morphine," were Cicely's first words on reaching her dressing-room.

"Law, mum, won't you wait till it's over?" said her maid.

"No, I must have some—my head is on fire. I think my brain is turning. Give me it quick." She walked up and down the narrow space, cumbered with the dresses and accessories of her part, her hands pressed against her temples.

“And no wonder, if you ask me, after such a tantrum as she was in to-day,” was the woman’s inward comment, with a servant’s grisly knowledge of the faults and failings of her superiors which we all find it convenient to ignore, if we cannot forget. “I am sure Mr Earlstoun is a quiet-spoken gentleman enough, if she’d only let him alone—leastways, it’s always she that makes the noise.”

Cicely’s indolence and nervous excitability made her an exacting and a very trying mistress, and Chapman was therefore less of a partisan than might have been expected. Cicely had fits of reckless generosity, however, and was at all times heedless and extravagant, so that Chapman’s position had many advantages, in spite of what, in confidence with her compeers, she called her mistress’s “everlasting worriting.”

“You won’t be ready, mum, unless you let me begin,” said Chapman, administering the dose.

The interval, which seemed long to Adair, sitting in painful silent constraint, was short enough for the making of another elaborate

toilet. Cicely's gowns, with the feminine portion of her audience, frequently divided the interest with her acting. She submitted very passively to her maid's rapid skilful hands. "I don't know how I am to get through it. I can't face them again," she said suddenly, clasping her hands over her eyes.

"Law, mum," said Chapman encouragingly, "to hear *you* speak like that, as if you were a chit of a debootant, and every one saying as how you've outdone even yourself to-night, and the best scene to come yet. You're tired—and no wonder, for it's that 'ot; but wait till the call comes, and you'll be all right."

She had outdone herself. Cicely knew that she had never acted with such power as she had done to-night; but what did it matter since it had failed to kindle one single gleam of admiration or relenting on Douglas's face? She had built so much on his seeing her once more in her own kingdom, and now this last hope had failed her. There was little time for thought—the last chords of the orchestra

were subsiding. She rose, steadying herself against the back of her chair, feeling physically unfit for what lay before her. The sharp rap came to her door, and the light flashed up into her eyes again. She would show Adair she was not conquered yet. If Adair were younger, fresher, fairer, better loved than she, she would show her that she could wield a power Adair could never hope to possess. At least, if her own desires could never be fulfilled, she could bar her husband's for ever. There was some satisfaction in that, she thought, with a short laugh that made even the stolid Chapman start. One more glance at the skilfully made-up face, and she thrust the bottle she would require by-and-by, at the climax of Lenore's fate, into her pocket, and hurried away.

Chapman was right. Like a thoroughbred answering to the spur, Cicely swept on to the stage again. The applause, the rows of eager expectant faces, were the wine of life to her, firing her veins anew. The closing scene was a terribly exacting one, being

almost wholly a monologue, after Lenore makes a last vain attempt to confess all to the man who still looks on her as his honoured wife. Her courage fails, the expiation is too dreadful; she says only enough to arouse suspicion, then temporises, tries to appease him, seeks finally only to gain a little time, "she will tell him all—all that there is—it is only her foolishness—in an hour—when he comes back."

Then followed the scene in which the actress was really great,—the choice between life and death,—to live scorned, outcast, or—to *die*! Those who heard Cicely utter those last two words seemed to realise at once the horror of that plunge into the darkness,—not only the physical shudder of warm life and quick-running blood from the chill silence that may cover—what? but the terrified recoil of the luxurious pampered flesh, of the pleasure-loving nature, which has known nothing, sought for nothing, hoped for nothing, beyond what earth could give. Old memories, long-forgotten words from the far-away days of

young innocence, come rushing back upon her. Superstitious horror casts a lurid glare over the blackness of the abyss, on to whose brink despair is goading her, while with feeble desperate hands she fights against her doom. The minutes are dropping away; she hears her husband's voice without, hard and stern to her excited fancy — anything rather than to see his face when he knows all, and the poor frail soul takes the final irrevocable leap. Such a scene, and the long slow death-struggle that followed, are familiar enough. Cicely hastily swallowed the draught, and flung the bottle away. Sinking on to a couch, she covered her face for a second in silent awe, while the stillness deepened around. A stillness more impressive than the black hush of midnight, or the eerie, brooding, lonesome silence among the hills when the winds are quiet — the stillness of a great crowd, when each individual self is for the moment forgotten, when every breath is held, and every eye drawn to one supreme enthralling centre.

In an instant she had sprung to her feet again, swift vain repentance following the mad impulse. Life ! life ! life at any price ! anywhere on the green earth, was her cry ; only to see the sun—to hear the cheerful voices of living men. Her husband might have forgiven—who could tell ? He would forgive her surely, when she lay dead before him—dead for the love of him that she could not bear to lose, and yet live. Forgive her ? Yes, he might ; and call her name—Lenore, Lenore, and press hot kisses, ay, and rain hot tears on her dead face. But she would be dead—dead—cold, and stiff, and still—she would not know, nor see, nor feel what would be heaven to her now ! Oh for one sight of his face, while she could yet see, to take with her, where ?—where ? “O my God, if I must die, let me live till I see him !” and pouring out her agony in broken disjointed words, the poor creature rushed to the door that she had made fast upon herself, and strove with her dimming sight and groping trembling hands to open it.

What was this? Was her imagination playing her false? Were her senses leaving her—that one dread that haunted her in her paroxysms of passion? What was happening to her? Like the poor soul in extremity whom she was simulating, a darkness was falling round her too, as she wrenched vainly at the door. She turned round, and as through some shrouding veil she saw the crowding mass of faces, no longer in row upon row, but vague and floating as in a cloud—faces above, around, everywhere—changing, melting into one another. None was distinct but her husband's, with angry accusing eyes; even Adair's had vanished. Was she going to be ill? Her limbs were failing her as she tottered towards the foot-lights, her tongue refused to utter the familiar words—familiar once, surely, but now what were they? Through the silent house rang a cry hoarse and awful, as the frightful truth flashed across her mind. This heavy lethargy weighing down limbs and voice and eyes, those thronging visionary faces, that dull muffled roar waxing louder and louder in her

ears, was *death*! She herself was dying. She had poisoned herself. She had drunk the morphine, not the stimulating draught prepared for the purpose. Her own feet were sliding down into that black pit of despair on whose brink, as Lenore, she had been shivering. In one instant the Horror stood revealed before her, dispelling for the moment the deepening stupor. She flung out her long slender arms, as if she could throw off the clogging weight, and made one more effort to go on with her part. It could not be—she was mad to dream of such a thing. But heavier and heavier that crushing weight pressed down, louder and ever louder grew the sound of those rushing waters; lights and faces, life and hope, were vanishing away. Even at that awful moment, in the last struggle of conscious reason, came the darting thought like a scorpion's sting, "If I die he will marry Adair."

"O my God, my God! I cannot die—I cannot die—I cannot die!" she shrieked, her voice rising to a piercing intensity. For a second she stood with outstretched arms, a

lonely splendid figure amid the blaze of light ; then with a moan she fell forward and lay still.

There was a dead silence, and then a deafening roar of applause—the first astonishment at this unexpected change overcome by amazed admiration.

“Douglas,” said Adair, grasping his arm, “this is not acting ; I do not know what it is. There is something wrong. For God’s sake, go and see !”

“You don’t know Cicely’s powers yet,” said Douglas, trying to shake off the impression made perforce upon himself. He, too, had been carried away, and had forgotten everything but the forlorn despairing woman, who for a little had been Cicely no longer, making a show of herself before all who chose to gaze, but a suffering human being.

“Go and see,” reiterated Adair more urgently, almost shaking the arm she held, in anxiety she could not account for ; “this is *real*, whatever it is.”

“Gad, I never saw anything like that ! It is

only too lifelike, or deathlike rather—makes one's flesh creep," said a voice behind.

“‘By many a deathbed I have been,
And many a sinner's parting seen,
But never aught like this,’”

quoted another, with a tremulous little laugh.

“She's a bold woman, Cis Charteris; I don't believe there's another would have ventured a new effect like that, and succeeded too, by Jove!”

But Cicely did not stir: the tumult of hands and voices died quaveringly away—whispers began to rise.

“You are right, Adair. I must see what this is,” said Douglas, in a changed voice, hastily rising and forcing his way out. Lord Dunscombe followed him.

“Really it is too provoking that this should have happened to-night,” said Lady Maxwell, in a tone of the utmost aggravation, “although it is exactly what I said weeks ago would happen if Cicely persisted in going on as she was doing. Douglas ought not to have allowed it, but he never would listen to reason

about his affairs. And how does he expect we are to get the carriage, or get home? It is most inconsiderate rushing off and leaving us in this fashion. What do you think can be wrong, Adair? Can she have fainted? I wish some one would come and tell us. Anything like this makes such a talk. Oh, they are letting the curtain down—there must be something wrong.”

Adair scarcely heard Isabel’s fretful monologue. The excitement and confusion around were increasing, the murmurs were swelling louder and louder, people began to rise and to crowd out. Presently Lord Dunscombe reappeared, making his way towards them.

“Earlstoun has asked me to see you to your carriage, Lady Maxwell,” he said. The lad’s face was white.

“We cannot go,” said Adair abruptly, before Isabel could speak, “till we know what is wrong.”

“Shall we go to the stage-door? I could get the carriage brought round there,” suggested

the young man eagerly. "Earlstoun must come that way, and we would hear sooner."

Douglas meantime was making his way through dark tortuous passages to the back of the stage. Emerging half-dazzled from that dim chaos on to the stage at last, he found the curtain already lowered. From behind it came a buzz of excited voices, which some one speaking in a loud authoritative tone was evidently trying to quell. He saw nothing, however, but the group crowded round the prostrate figure. The pale scared look on every face contrasted strangely with the stage bloom. A girl, crying from vague fright and excitement, the unheeded tears oddly streaking her rouge and powder, was supporting Cicely's head.

"I am her husband," said Douglas briefly, in answer to a questioning look, putting one or two of the onlookers aside; and kneeling down by Cicely's side, he took one of the limp fallen hands and looked into her face.

"Is this where we are to wait?" fumed Lady Maxwell, down in the narrow dingy

passage. "I am sure I hope we shall not be kept long. It might occur to Douglas, I think, how anxious we are." Apparently Isabel considered herself personally injured by the unlooked-for interruption of her evening's amusement. Outside Cicely's brougham was already waiting, and the usual knot of loungers was hanging about. Isabel did not need to protest and fidget long. In a few moments Douglas appeared, his wife in his arms, her long train of faintly tinted velvet trailing on the ground, and impeding his steps every now and then. With him were the manager and one or two men, talking in agitated whispers, while Chapman, crying noisily, brought up the rear. One look at Douglas's face and at the one lying on his shoulder was enough; even Isabel let him pass in silence.

"Isabel," said Adair, suddenly, "I must go too. There will be no one in the house but maids, I suppose, and they will be too frightened to be of any use. I might be able to help."

An hour or two later the house which had resounded with hasty footfalls, anxious voices, and quick peremptory orders, was quiet enough. Down-stairs the maids were crying and gossiping by turns; Chapman, the heroine of the occasion, was retailing for the twentieth time, with a frightful gusto only equalled by that of her hearers, the minutest details of the tragedy, in a manner that shed new light upon her imaginative powers. All were possessed by a sort of lugubrious elation. That curious sense of importance, almost of satisfaction, which the common mind accrues to itself when there is "a death in the house," was increased tenfold now by the strangeness and suddenness of the event. Each felt already invested with the new dignity that would surround them on being authentic sources of information by-and-by of such a startling occurrence.

In the drawing-room Cicely was lying on the couch, where she had been laid at first on being brought home. The doctors, hastily summoned, had after long efforts given up

the struggle. Nothing more could be done—those words that have fallen like lead on many an anxious heart. The windows were widely opened to let in any breath of air. Outside the sultry blackness was like a solid wall, though low down above the house-tops hung the half-waned moon, hard and brassy-looking through the hot haze, and rayless as a mass of slowly cooling molten metal. The gaudy fantastic room was brightly lighted, the lamps burned clear and steady, there was no air stirring to cause the faintest flicker of the flame. Full and strong the light fell on that motionless figure stretched out in the midst—on the livid face, where the stage paint, hastily removed, still lingered in streaks, and mocked the deepening pallor. Beside her sat Douglas, as motionless as she. He had not spoken since the doctor had at last gone away, promising to return,—a return which each knew would be needless. Of Adair's presence, though she had shared his watch from the first, he seemed wholly unconscious. For a time she had been

busy enough. The doctors had been glad to avail themselves of her skilled services, but now she too could only look helplessly at that poor pinched face on which death was every moment more clearly written, though the hard-drawn breath still struggled through the parted lips. She could do nothing—she was no longer needed. She rose, feeling as if her presence, though it was unnoticed, was an intrusion in that ghastly death-chamber—all the more ghastly in its garish incongruous brightness. Stealing softly out, she crossed the hall into the dining-room, where Lady Maxwell, who had grudgingly accompanied her, had long been comfortably asleep on a sofa.

Husband and wife were left alone together as the last moments of that unloving, unlovely union sped swiftly away. In the confused horror that filled Douglas's mind, there had been but one distinct thought at first,—the dread that the poor, overwrought, over-excited creature had in desperation flung her life away, and that his heedless words, his

unexplained appearance in the theatre, had given the last touch to the wavering balance. Such a dread was terrible enough to unnerve any man, and it grew stronger and stronger while he sat there in the hot heavy silence, where, amid all the glare of light, the air seemed weighted with the palpable presence of death. If it is bitter to sit by powerless, and let some loved soul drift out into the darkness beyond the reach of voice or hand for evermore, it is bitterer far, surely, when there has been no love. When that parting comes at last, to which in some secret lurking-place of the heart we may once have looked forward as to the breaking of a yoke, what a merciless light late remorse sheds over the past! Douglas Earlstoun had had but little cause to love his wife; but whatever his sins against her might have been, he expiated them to the full that night. There are no anæsthetics in spiritual surgery,—no numbness of feeling when that sword which is quick and powerful, and which can pierce even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, is

wielded by conscience. The wounds it makes may be healed, but the scars can never be wholly effaced. Whatever life might yet hold for him, the memory of that night would have power to darken every joy for him until his dying day. The vigil was a long one: slowly and reluctantly that dense wall of blackness yielded, and crumbled away before the growing day. The lamplight grew yellow and sickly in the colourless chill of dawn. The grey light was growing stronger, morning had fairly come. Lady Maxwell shivered, sat up, and stared round at her strange surroundings, and at Adair sitting by the window with bowed head and clasped hands. She was about to speak, when Adair suddenly raised her hand. For the first time through those long hours a sound broke the stillness. A door—*that* door—opened and was closed again, and a slow heavy step passed by and went up the stair.

CHAPTER XII.

To those sanguine souls who can take their pleasure largely in anticipation, the lengthening days may suggest pleasant visions of budding woods, of balmy days when the east wind shall have ceased from troubling, and of the summer which, though still afar off, is surely drawing nearer. To most of us, however, they serve at first on the whole rather to accentuate the dreariness of a season which may be spring according to the calendar, but for which departing winter often reserves his fiercest onslaughts.

Some such feeling might have been pardonable in an inmate of the Middleton drawing-room on a typical late February afternoon. The house was built in the bastard Greek style, and, with its great pillared front, sug-

gestive of some Exchange or town-hall, looked out of place enough amid the swelling slopes and wooded haughs of Tweedside. From the long range of windows there was only too wide a view of the harsh dull sky, against which the hills rose bare and cold, while through sodden fallow-field and ploughed land, and brown leafless wood and covert, "Tweed's siller streams" rolled "drumlie and dark" indeed. Lady Maxwell had no reason, however, as yet to shrink from the flood of cold searching light pouring in through those many windows, and she was always too placidly self-absorbed to be much affected by such trifles as "skyey influences" or the aspects of nature. At present she formed the centre of quite a pretty little family group.

"When we are alone I always have the children with me for a little in the afternoon," she would say, with the air of a Cornelia, "or Claud would forget what they are like, he really is so busy." With little Evelyn leaning against her knee, and the

much-desired son and heir, now a month or two old, on her lap, she would have been pronounced by most people, in her large serene smiling fairness, to be a perfect emblem of motherhood,—a Madonna rather of the Flemish than of the more spiritual Italian school, however. Some women are never seen to greater advantage than when with their infants in their arms ; the helplessness, the entire dependence of the child, awakens a deeper tenderness, thrills a finer fibre, which apparently ceases to vibrate as the young life becomes more and more a separate existence. Hence the little cooing speeches to Claud the younger had none of the subacid flavour that underlay the remarks and admonitions to Evelyn, who had long ago passed into the troublesome stage. Isabel looked none the worse for a slight air of languor, nor for some lack of her usual rather ponderous robustness ; while her blond colouring was heightened by her black gown, against which the white dresses of the children, and little Evelyn's bright hair, contrasted most effectively. Sir

Claud, teacup in hand, was leaning against the mantelpiece, surveying his wife and children with that air of self-satisfaction, of proprietorship, which even the meekest of men assume at such times, swelling a little in their own estimation at the consciousness that they are, or ought to be, objects of envy to less favoured mortals. Douglas Earlstoun, sunk in the cavernous depths of a big easy-chair on the other side of the fireplace, would possibly have smiled at the idea that under any circumstances he could envy his brother-in-law, but at that moment he was looking somewhat wistfully at the little domestic picture—the great stately room, the fair smiling woman, the bonnie bairns. A proud mother is always a pretty sight, but somehow a proud and happy father is apt to trench dangerously near the absurd, though Douglas just then was far from any inclination to be amused at little Sir Claud's unconscious ruffle of paternal conceit. As the passing glimpse of warmth and cosiness seen through a lighted window may appear a perfect paradise to some home-

less wayfarer in the darkness without, so this peep into another man's lot, into the common joys of life, made his own loneliness seem all the greater—a loneliness that was likely to be lasting now. The day before, amid the ruined glories of Melrose, he had stood by and had seen the grave closed over the only one to whom either he or his welfare were of any special concern, and henceforth he would have to content himself with such tepid interest as relatives or acquaintances could spare. Little as he had known of real home-life even from his boyhood, all his inclinations were naturally towards it, and possibly the peace and settled wellbeing around him seemed all the more desirable after his months of aimless wandering, and in the prospect of leaving his country—if home he had none to leave—together. He had gone abroad, where he did not care, immediately after his wife's death. Grief, in the ordinary sense of that word, he could not feel; there was no dear daily companionship to be missed, none of those little loving words and ways and actions

which make up so much of happiness, and whose absence makes such a blank in life ; but the frightful ending to his miserable married life had shaken his nature to its centre. True, he had been relieved from the first overwhelming horror that Cicely's action had been deliberate : so far, at least, as could be known, it appeared to have been a pure accident. But he could not acquit himself of the share his words and doings on that fatal evening might have had in rousing the frenzy of excitement in which the mistake had been made—a burden crushing enough for any heart when to its weight memory added every bitter word and look, every open sign of the inner revolt against what was growing a more galling yoke day by day. Now he was free from it, his life was his own once more—that poor, exacting, jealous, unhappy creature could vex neither him nor herself any longer ; but for a time, with a very natural inconsistency, that was but an added pain. With the crust of cold unhoping indifference, of heedless selfish indulgence fairly broken up, and his

better self fully aroused, Douglas was perhaps inclined to be morbid in his views of the past. Absorbed in self-accusings and un-availing regrets, he had gone about "seeking rest and finding none," till, when he had resolved to turn his steps homeward and seek some place and work for himself in the world, a message from Adair had reached him which had made him travel night and day, only to be met with those two words—the knell of love and hope on this side of time—too late!

He had fallen back into his own musings, and with his eyes absently fixed on the clouds slowly drifting in long procession past the line of windows, was paying but scant attention to the stream of talk between his sister and her husband. Isabel would have been extremely shocked and offended had any one hinted to her that her mother's death had been anything but a very deep grief to her. She honestly cherished the impression that it was so; but, as so often happens, the loss was one more in name than in reality. Self claimed such a large portion

of mind and thought, that there was but little room left for any other one; and in her married life her mother had had so little share, that her absence made no vital difference. She was discussing some question of local politics with the liveliest interest with Sir Claud, who had been giving an account of his day's doings—a formidable list of school board and county court meetings, and so on, which are certain to fall to the lot of any man who aspires to be considered “public-spirited.” This was Sir Claud’s *métier*—the rôle of an original thinker and independent politician being somewhat arduous to maintain; and if ever his zeal showed any sign of flagging, Isabel’s ambition spurred him on, while she fostered his harmless vanity in being such an overwrought man.

“That fellow Johnston is going to give us a lot of trouble, I am afraid; a mere shop-keeper too, but a very pushing, presuming fellow, who seems to think his opinion is as good as any other body’s,” Sir Claud was saying,—from which it will be seen that he

had somewhat modified his theories, or that, however generous they might be towards humanity in the mass, he rather resented any personal application of them.

Evelyn, whose childish dignity had been offended the evening before by her uncle's abstraction, had chosen to play the coquette, and to devote herself to her baby-brother. But little Claud being of the stolid unresponsive class of infant, she found her blandishments somewhat thrown away, and began to cast stray glances at the silent figure in the big chair. Presently she stole across beside him.

"I don't think you is so nice as you used to be, Uncle Douglas," she remarked at last judiciously, after a pause of serious contemplation.

"Very possibly, Evy; but what is the head and front of my offending?" said Douglas, sitting up, with a laugh.

"'Cause you do nothing but sit and sulk, and Nursey says it's naughty to sulk, and your face has got so scored," drawing a tiny

forefinger across her own smooth childish brow.

“One can’t always be young and beautiful, unluckily, Evy. Perhaps, if you come and speak to me, though, some of the scores may go away. There might not have been so many if a certain little girl had not neglected her poor old uncle when he had come so far to see her. Tell me how many of the rabbits are living, and if the kitty survived being turned into a baby and carried about wrapped in a shawl.”

“But she liked it,” protested Evelyn, eagerly—“she did indeed; for she purred all the time, and only gave a wee mew sometimes.”

“Ah, poor kitty! I am afraid she was a deep dissembler,” said Douglas, shaking his head, and enjoying Evelyn’s puzzled look at the long word.

“And what have you been doing with yourself all day, Earlstoun?” said her father, with the air of one unbending himself to trivialities.

"I? Oh, nothing particular — prowling about," said Douglas. He did not think it needful to inform his brother-in-law that he had gone many a mile to stand again in silence over that grave in the grey roofless aisle, where at least the old race and name still held undisputed possession, if nowhere else; and to see, if only in the distance, the familiar rounded summits of his own hills, beyond which lay what had once been home.

"I met Mitchell in Muirshiels to-day. He is quite disappointed at your not going to Earlshope—wants to see you about something, he says. I promised him I would speak to you about it. We could go to-morrow; I would try to spare the time," magnanimously.

"I shall not trespass on that valuable commodity, thanks. If Mitchell wants anything done, he can write to Moncrieff. As far as I am concerned, he may do pretty much as he pleases; he can't do much harm. The hills and the water can't be changed,

at least. I cannot possibly go to-morrow, though. I must go back to town."

Sir Claud laughed superior. "Excuse me, Earlstoun, but you idle people do amuse me. What difference could a day make, now? I thought you would have stayed till we went to town."

"You are very good, but as I expect to sail in less than a fortnight, I can't indulge in much more idleness."

"Mr Salmond to see you, Sir Claud," announced the butler.

"Ah, about that arbitration case, I suppose," setting down his cup. "You'll excuse me; you and Isabel will have plenty to say to each other. Really, it is getting worse here even than in town, I think. I never get a moment's peace."

He bustled away, and an elderly female functionary, fairly bristling with respectability, appeared at the door. At a sign from Isabel she relieved her of Master Claud,—a transference which that pattern infant bore with the most commendable composure, and

then stood waiting for Evelyn like an inexorable fate.

"I don't want to go. Uncle Douglas wants to hear about the rabbits. Don't you, Uncle Douglas?" clasping her arms tightly round his neck.

"Let her stay, Isabel; who knows when I shall see the child again?" pleaded Douglas. He would fain have listened to her childish talk, and looked into those hazel eyes, which were thrilling him anew with their likeness to those which he would see never again; but Isabel was unrelenting.

"She will come down for dessert, of course, but I am sorry she cannot stay now. I cannot have my arrangements interfered with," she said stiffly, in a tone that convinced even Evelyn that resistance was useless.

"Never mind, I will sit on your knee *all* the time, and we'll see *all* the rabbits to-morrow," she said in a loud whisper, as a parting consolation.

"Are you really going to persist in this American scheme, Douglas?" said Isabel, as

soon as the door was closed. "I should think it was time you were settling down rather, instead of going off again."

"If you will tell me *where* I am to settle down, and, what is still more important, *on what*, I am sure I shall be very glad, Isabel."

"Oh, there is no use of me advising you, I know; but I suppose matters are at least no worse than ever they were," said Isabel, tartly. She had nearly added, "You have a claim less on you now," but fortunately refrained.

"I am not precisely penniless, of course, but it is time I was bestirring myself if ever I am to pay my just and lawful debts—not that the bulk of them are really mine, except by inheritance. They won't take me back to my old trade, and I am ten years too old to take up a fresh one. In spite of the dock strikes, there is no great demand for 'unskilled labour' here, so I think I had better betake myself somewhere else."

"Of course you know best," said Isabel, in that tone which suggests that the speaker

thinks precisely the opposite. "May I ask what your plans are, if you have any? Do you mean to turn drover, or digger, or what?"

"You will not be there to be scandalised by anything I may do, at least. I understand a slight acquaintance with butchering comes in wonderfully handy," with a laugh. "I am going to join Rainsford on his ranche; he is doing very well, I believe. I shall stay with him for a while, and look about me a bit. It is not a new idea. I would have gone long ago, but——" he stopped abruptly.

"After all, you might as well have been away," said Isabel, with that blunt cruelty which we generally reserve for our near relatives. "Poor mother!" she said, after a moment's pause, taking out her pocket-handkerchief, and looking attentively at the broad black border. "It was so very distressing that none of us could be with her."

Douglas winced. It was not a subject he could speak of, least of all with Isabel.

"I cannot tell you how it has added to

my grief," she went on; "but when the message came I really was in no state for the journey; indeed Claud would not have allowed it"—(had Douglas been in the mood for it, he would probably have smiled at the idea of Sir Claud exerting any controlling power over his wife) — "and from the telegram I felt sure from the first that the journey would have been in vain. You quite understand how it happened, Douglas?"

"Quite," said Douglas, drily; but after all, what right had he to judge? Had he not delayed his return from mere disinclination to begin life afresh? Had he not been only too ready to accept the statements in Adair's brief letters, when he ought to have read between the lines, and been aroused to anxiety sooner?

"I really think that Adair ought not to have kept us in ignorance so long. With her experience, she must surely have known sooner what was coming," said Isabel, in an injured tone.

"And I think we owe her a debt of grati-

tude that I for one can never express nor hope to repay," said Douglas, with emphasis.

"Oh, she has been very attentive, I have no doubt," said Isabel, carelessly. "But after all, nursing is her business, so to speak, and it must have been a great deal easier for her in Park Street than in the hospital."

"I am ashamed to think I let her stay in that house; I ought to have urged her to go to Clara, or anywhere else," said Douglas, half to himself.

"I don't think you need disturb yourself about that. Pincott is as good as a chaperon any day."

"Chaperon! I was not thinking of any nonsense of that sort," said Douglas, indignantly. "But after all that she must have come through, she ought not to have been left alone there."

"I believe she is coming to Earlshope shortly; but at any rate, I hardly think she will be *alone* very much longer," with a significant smile.

"You refer to her marriage, I suppose,"

said Douglas, quietly enough. "When is it to come off?"

"I should think very soon now. I fancy she only waited till — till her help was no longer needed," said Isabel, seeking for some euphuistic phrase. "I know Mr Dallas was pretty often at Haslemere, and after they returned he was constantly at Park Street. I met him there more than once when we were in town for a little in November. Claud got frightened about me; and insisted on me seeing Sir Digby Graves, and from all appearances it was quite settled then; indeed mother as good as told me that it was so. She seemed very pleased at the idea," with a little tributary sigh.

Douglas rose suddenly and administered one or two quite unnecessary pokes to the glowing fire. Isabel's recollections of her last hurried visit to Park Street had grown rather vague. She had been so much occupied with herself and her symptoms, and the great doctor's opinion, that, beyond the fact that Mr Dallas was there, she had

hardly noticed him further. She spoke, however, with no special *arrière-pensée*, and unaffectedly believed what she said. If Douglas married again—as of course for the sake of the name and the estate, which would clear itself in time, he ought to do—it would be very desirable that he should choose some one who would bring money in exchange for an old name and a long descent. To marry Adair would be almost as great a mistake as his first unlucky venture; but Lady Maxwell, who did not look much below the surface, had long ago concluded that he had quite got over his fancy for his cousin, if ever it had been so serious as she had once thought. Mischief-making is seldom the result of motive, after all.

“If she has put off her own—happiness so long on our account, or rather, for our mother’s sake, I can only say again that she has done what I believe no other one but herself would have done, and God bless her for it!” said Douglas, with a thrill of such emotion that Isabel looked round in surprise.

“Poor Dallas ! it must have been rather rough on him. I wonder he has been so patient. However, he will get his reward now. I suppose the wedding can hardly be next week, or I might have given away the bride. It would have been extremely appropriate,—no one certainly has a better right,” with a bitter laugh, that to a more sensitive ear than Isabel’s might have suggested some doubts as to the completeness of that cure of which she was so placidly assured.

“That would be scarcely decent,” she said, with a little reproving smile. “They will hardly be in such haste, I should think ; but Claud or Mr Mitchell, who is, after all, her nearest male relative, would do quite as well as you.”

Douglas laughed again,—that kind of laughter which in Scotland is pithily described as being “on the wrong side of the mouth.”

“I am going out for a turn before it gets dark,” he said, moving away.

“You won’t have much time,” said Isabel,

in an admonitory tone. "The dressing-gong will sound immediately."

"What would you do to me if I were late, Isabel?" with a smile. "Never mind, I don't take long to beautify."

He crossed the lawn, spongy with wet, and vaulting the fence that divided it from the park, went down to the river-side. Like some mighty irresistible fate, the olive-coloured waters were sweeping silently by, "too full for sound or foam," as if bent on some fixed stern purpose. Under the darkening sky this swift current, speeding soundlessly along, seemed some direful thing, instead of the familiar river. Douglas stood dreamily watching the broad swathes of the surface, sucked down every now and then into fierce, if tiny, whirlpools, forming and filling and forming again endlessly. After all, what had Isabel told him that he had not known long ago, and for which he had fancied himself, in some measure, at least, prepared? In the first shock of Cicely's death, he had vainly striven against his

hopeless love, in that forlorn attempt to make amends to the dead for our sins against them in life. The cutting off of the right hand, or the plucking out of the eye, would have been a direct and simple operation, however, compared with the task of severing from himself what had become inwrought with every fibre and feeling. If once Adair were married, and he far away, and half the world lying between them, he had tried to persuade himself that he might bid good-bye to the past, and begin life anew,—as some weary sufferer may, at times, have a sick longing even for the surgeon's knife: better any sharp final pang than this dull endless aching. Even had Adair still been free to choose, what had he to offer her compared with Dallas? He had done little or nothing to retrieve his position; he could not bear to let his mother want for anything; and his own life had not been such as to lessen his difficulties. But, apart from such considerations—and he did Adair the justice to acknowledge they would weigh less with her

than any other—how did he compare in any other respect with the man whom she had chosen? It was not a very pleasant question to answer and yet be honest, and led only to the one conclusion. It was better for him to go,—to take the last shadow of the past from her path, to waste no more of his life in fruitless longing for the impossible; to do something, if he could, to redeem the old name, though he would be the last wearer of it. All very true and proper,—the one course left for him, indeed. But, unfortunately, the heart is a most illogical organ, and refuses to be satisfied with any quantity of the most polished stones that reason can offer it, in place of the bread of desire which it craves. After having laboriously argued self out of the field, it was perhaps only natural that Douglas should suddenly be conscious of nothing but a paralysing life-weariness, a longing to give up a struggle that seemed as aimless as it was hopeless—to let himself drift anywhere, like those dry broken branches, borne along on the swift dark current by

which he stood. There was no escape from his burden in that fashion, but he watched the eddying rush in a kind of fascination, till brain and eye grew giddy, and he turned away abruptly towards the house. Along the great black bulk which stood out, dark and solid, against the night sky, lights were gleaming here and there, while a broad steady glow came from the dining-room windows. Daily life in all its easy prosperous monotony was going on within, its master and mistress serene in the consciousness that their wellbeing was the result of their well-doing, and ready by an easy process of reasoning to trace all the misfortunes of their friends, and above all of their relatives, to some lack of those virtues of which they afforded so shining an example,—a conclusion somewhat galling to those who feel that the battle of life is going against them.

“This is rather too suggestive a place to linger in,” said Douglas to himself, with a backward glance at the rapid waters now growing indistinct; “besides,” with a grim little smile, “I must not keep dinner waiting.”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE advocates of the superior cheerfulness of town over country in wintry weather might have had some difficulty in maintaining their theory on the following afternoon in Park Street. Through the thick dingy yellowish medium, perforce accepted as daylight, the houses, still mostly blank and shuttered, loomed vaguely. From every spout and projection, from roof and window-ledge, the moisture dripped heavy and slow down their grimy fronts, while through the raw nipping air big, flabby, indeterminate snowflakes sailed hesitatingly down, as if shrinking visibly from the black streaming mud on street and pavement, into which they were one by one swallowed up.

Within, the prospect was not much more

cheerful, and Adair, sitting alone by the fire, her hands idly folded for the first time for many days, was not sorry when the leaping flames began to overpower such light as still came from the foggy smudge of sky visible above the houses, and to veil a little with their ruddy glow and dancing shadows the forlorn emptiness around. The drawing-room had already that desolate uninhabited look which a room acquires when all the little surroundings and accessories of daily life, which stamp the character of its inmates upon it, are removed, and it is reduced to the mere chairs and tables, with no more meaning or interest in them than in an upholstery show-room. The house was a furnished one, and was no longer required. She herself would be leaving it very soon, to make room by-and-by for some other group of lives, who would bring their own cares, and joys, and sorrows into those well-known rooms, now so eerily unfamiliar and deserted-looking.

For several days she had been busy enough at that dismallest of tasks—the putting away

of the last relics of a vanished life, when the veriest trifles become sacred things that it is bitter to part with, and are handled with reverent awe. Would they seem so to any other one? Adair had asked herself rather bitterly more than once, feeling amid her own grief a sort of jealous resentment for the memory of the dead—that, after all, the beautiful, brilliant woman had so few to mourn for her. Had it been but a few months sooner, she knew that she herself would have felt little more on hearing of her aunt's death than some natural regret—some pity at the gloomy overshadowed ending of a life for so long outwardly full and prosperous. Now it was very different. During the past weeks and months of ever-increasing weakness and suffering, the elder and the younger woman had drawn very closely together; the hearts of both were following a weary wanderer wherever he went, and the common love and sympathy knit them into one. Adair had learned to know and to appreciate the warm heart and generous

nature, warped and mingled though both might be by the strain of worldly alloy, and to honour the brave spirit that had borne so unflinchingly such a cruel ordeal. Though her one desire upon earth had been for her son's presence, she would not let him be sent for, nor would she allow him to be told of her growing illness. "He is better away, poor boy ! don't bring him back yet—it would only grieve him to see me as I am," she would say ; till at last Adair, feeling that Douglas ought not to be kept in ignorance any longer, had taken upon herself to send the summons that had reached him only too late. Of his suffering Adair could not bear to think, nor of his face when he had speechlessly grasped her arm, looking into her eyes for an answer to the question he could not ask. Yes, of his grief there was but too little doubt, nor in its own way of poor Pincott's. But beyond them was there any other one who would feel much of a blank in their daily lives ? Isabel had let her health — Adair's lips curled a little at the thought—keep her

in Scotland. Clara had shed floods of tears over the peaceful face in its placid awful beauty, but had dried them to speculate on how soon she might begin to go out again,—"in a very quiet way, of course, at first; but people have quite got over those old-fashioned ideas about shutting one's self up like a nun, and muffling one's self up in crape. Frank is awfully good, of course, but we couldn't be expected to stand each other undiluted very long—could we, now? and I know it is the last thing *she* would have wished that I should mope," with a little subsiding sob at the allusion. No; Clara was not likely to mope very long.

As she sat in the firelight in this pause of life, one chapter ended for ever, the new one hardly yet begun, Adair's own thoughts began insensibly to slip away towards the future. "I leave you to comfort him, Adair." The words seemed breathed to her through the twilight—almost the last words Mrs Earls-toun had uttered when the parting struggle had come so suddenly, and the poor wrung

heart had realised that not on earth would she see her son again. Adair had hardly seen Douglas since that first meeting. In sympathy she had followed him on that mournful journey to Melrose—had seen the grave yawn black under the mighty arch of the ruined nave, while through the great southern window a snow-sprinkled crest of Eildon looked coldly in, and the wintry wind shrilled through the roofless cloisters. He would need comfort indeed—his face, as she had seen it last, so changed, so aged, so sad, rising again before her. Ah, if she could comfort him! and alone in the firelight as she was, she covered her face with her hands, half ashamed of the quick leap of her pulses at the very thought; but soon enough the chill reaction came. Had he any wish for such comfort as she could give? She could not tell. The ghastly tragedy of Cicely's death, those months of absence, of restless wandering from place to place, seemed to have set a wider gulf between them than even his marriage and the years of separation

that had followed. At least, when she went to Earlshope she would surely see him again. He might not care to come there, but he would be at Middleton. The door opened; she drew away her hands from her eyes, expecting only to see Pincott with her tea. It was Douglas himself. He seemed to misinterpret her startled look, for he said almost humbly—

“Ought I not to have come, Adair? This house has been all the home I have known for a long time now, and I took a fancy to see it again before it was left empty,” looking doubtfully into her face. His eyes said, “I wished to see you,” though his lips did not.

“Why should you not have come?” said Adair, smiling, and trying to speak in the tone of quiet friendliness she usually maintained towards him. “I supposed it was Pincott coming with tea, in return for which I generally indulge the poor soul in a little gossip just now. I was surprised to see you, for I thought you were still in Scotland. I had no idea you intended returning so soon.”

“There was nothing to keep me there after—after Tuesday,” said Douglas, with a slight break in his voice. “I was glad to get away, indeed. I feel rather out of place at present amid all those good, comfortable, prosperous people. It is very sage advice, ‘Go not into thy brother’s house in the day of thy calamity.’ You see I haven’t quite forgotten the doses of Proverbs old Mackay used to administer to us—although, after all, it is no great certificate of character to be able to quote Scripture.”

“How is Isabel? Is she better?”

“I am afraid I was very unsympathetic. I told her I thought she was looking very well, but found I had made a great mistake in doing so. They are coming to town shortly, however, I believe. The councils of the nation cannot get on without Claud, it seems, and for his sake and theirs Isabel will sacrifice herself, and accompany him.”

There was a moment’s pause. “You would not see anything of my mother or Agnes?” asked Adair, rather to break the silence than for any other reason.

“No ; Mitchell was good enough to ask me to Earlshope,” said Douglas, with a little smile. “Well, I suppose it was rather weak of me ; but I could not face it somehow. I saw the top of the Camp over the Muirshiels smoke, and I fancy that is the last of the old place I shall see for many a day. Indeed, though there will never be any place like it to me, I would almost be tempted to sell it if I were free to do so. Mitchell would buy it to-morrow for the son and heir ; he was throwing out feelers on the subject. Poor old chap ! how proud he is of that morsel of humanity !”

“I am afraid they think me a very indifferent and cold-hearted relative, as I have not seen my interesting nephew yet. I shall have that joy shortly, though, as I am going north very soon.”

“So I was told. I hope you are prepared for an unlimited amount of baby-worship, then. You should have heard Isabel and Mitchell comparing notes as to their respective nursery gods. It was really too funny.”

Douglas had been speaking till now in the cold indifferent voice to which she had grown accustomed, but after a moment he turned towards her with a sudden change of face and tone. "Adair," he said, "will you tell me what you can about—about her, and those last few weeks? I know it was done in kindness—she wished to spare me, as she always tried to do; but I ought to have been here. If even I had been in time for one word. I can never forgive myself." Words often lightly enough said, but spoken now with their fullest weight of meaning. "It was far too great a burden for you alone."

"Don't speak of it as a burden, Douglas," said Adair, gently.

"I mean the care—the anxiety; but *you* loved her, Adair?" looking at her wistfully, as if seeking for the assurance that the memory so precious to himself was dear to some other one, at least.

"I loved her very dearly," said Adair in a low voice, her eyes brimming over. From her own feelings she could easily divine how the

conventional decorous regret at Middleton must have jarred upon him.

Douglas sat looking into the fire, shading his eyes with his hand, while Adair told him what she could—no easy task. She did not wish to add to his pain, and she could hardly bear to speak of those last hours, when it seemed as if death itself had been kept at bay for a time by the sheer force of love and longing, as if his mother *could not die* till her wish had been fulfilled. How tell him that she had refused everything that might have soothed her suffering, lest she should be unconscious when her son came, and all in vain!

When the broken faltering words ceased, there was a long silence.

“Adair,” said Douglas gently, though his voice showed how much shaken he was, “I cannot tell you what my mother was to me those last few years. I have been a fool, and a great deal worse than a fool,” bitterly; “and had it not been for her and for—for one other thought, I think I would have lost any faith

in goodness that was left me. When I think what you have done for her, when I think how lonely her last days would have been but for you, I can never thank you. Thank you! that is a very poor return," with a wavering smile. "I know that you need nothing from me, that I can do nothing for you, but it can do you no harm to know that you have my whole heart's gratitude—that wherever I may go I will take the thought of you with me, and the memory of what you have done. No one will grudge me that, I think." He took her folded hands in both his own, and kissed them passionately, then with a sigh he let them fall and rose. Adair rose too. He answered the question in her eyes which her lips could not frame.

"I am going to America—out west somewhere, I don't precisely know where yet, but I am sick of clubs and drawing-rooms and civilisation generally," trying to speak more lightly. "I wanted to go long ago, and, as it has turned out, I might as well have been at the ends of the earth after all. If I see any-

thing likely, I shall try to settle down and *do* something. Do you remember our old controversy about that word? I have been idle long enough, but I don't seem fit for any work here; even you would not hold out any hope for me," with an attempt at a smile.

Adair stood looking at him with parted lips on which the breath seemed frozen, and with wide-strained eyes. The past and its tender memories, in which both had been absorbed, vanished in the dim sense that the crisis of her life had come, and yet she could not speak; a cold heavy hand seemed pressing on heart and brain.

"I hope you will be very happy, dear," Douglas said, very quietly and kindly. "God knows you deserve to be, and if my heart's wish could make you happy, you would be. At least you—you have made a good choice this time." He seemed as if he would fain have said more, but paused and stood looking at her for a second with sad yearning eyes—at the snowdrop whiteness of face and throat, at the deep brown eyes—"sweetest eyes were

ever seen," now and always to him—at the crown of hair which the firelight was bur-nishing with a richer glow. Such a look we bend on some beloved face, whose familiar features we shall see no more till the earth shall cast forth her dead (and God knows whether they may be familiar then !), while we strive to print the well-known outlines deeper and deeper on heart and mind, lest in the long dim years to come they may fade and grow dim too.

How could he not read her face? How is it that it is but our own impressions we see in each other's eyes? Something of its meaning did pierce through all his preconceived ideas, enough almost to shake his resolve for a moment.

"Speak to her now, this moment is your own; the past is not wholly dead, it is waking now,—why let your last chance go? Speak, and she will be in your arms, where you can hold her against the world," something seemed to say audibly within him. No; to that he had not fallen. He had broken faith once;

God forgive him if he tempted another, least of all his love, to do the same. But after all, it was only natural she should show some emotion on parting with him, her cousin and friend of old days if nothing more, for life perhaps.

The temptation passed in a flash. One last look, and then he stooped suddenly and kissed her on the lips. "Forgive me, dear," he said. "I know I have less than no right to do it,—but I think if I were dying you would not refuse me a kiss, and this is much the same."

He was gone; she heard the heavy outer door clang behind him. The sound roused her from her frozen bewildered stupor. Why had she let him go? Why had she not flung pride to the winds? Why had she not given him kiss for kiss—held him in her arms, if need be; told him that the love he had won from her that far-away morning was, spite of all—spite of time and every change—all his own yet? Why had she stood like a dumb senseless stone and let Douglas bid her a life-long farewell?—for this was no ordinary good-bye. Was this the

comfort she had to give him,—to let him go heavy-hearted and alone to a strange land and an uncertain future? What had he meant by speaking of her choice, and hoping that she might be happy—happy, when she had let her last hope of happiness slip away for lack of the courage to say, “Where thou goest I will go”! Was it too late yet? It might be unmaidenly, unwomanly, but she could not let him go. Scarcely knowing what she did, she rushed down the stair, through the hall, opened the door with trembling fingers, and looked out into the night. The snow had changed to heavy rain, a moaning wind was rising. Far away down the empty street she could still see the tall figure in the rainy gleam of the lamps on the wet pavement. A moment more and it was swallowed up in the darkness. Her cousin Douglas had vanished out of her sight and out of her life for ever.

“Thou’lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never.”

That piercing wail of despairing anguish was

the unconscious cry of her heart, as she stood gazing down the blank street, heedless of the chill darkness and the rising wind which drove the stinging rain in spiteful little dashes against her face.

CHAPTER XIV.

“I CANNOT see any one this morning!” exclaimed Adair hastily, when, in the midst of her final packing next day, Pincott appeared with a card. The last hope of a life may go down, but still life must flow on. She could not stay longer in this house, whose dull half-empty rooms had become sacred places to her. She had promised to go to Earlshope, and go she must, whatever it might cost her. A heartbreak is not a current society excuse—not a sufficient reason for breaking an engagement, though a headache may be.

“Indeed, Miss Adair, you look fitter for your bed than for travelling, if you ask me,” said Pincott, who had looked on Adair at first with jealous dislike as an intruder, but who had long ago been won over to warm admira-

tion and liking. The good woman had been devoured with curiosity as to Mr Douglas's visit, as she still called him, the night before, and regarded it as the cause for the girl's white face and heavy eyes. Like all servants, she knew a great deal more of the real state of matters than might be supposed. Though she would once, like her mistress, have regarded "Mr Douglas taking Miss Adair" as little short of a calamity, she had come to look forward to it eagerly, and to count upon it as a certainty, now that "that poor thing was mercifully out of the way." She had expected much from Douglas's sudden visit, but the way in which we mismanage our affairs is always an astonishment to onlookers, and Pincott was utterly unable to imagine what could have happened, or why they had not "made it up" after all.

Adair rose slowly from the half-filled trunk by which she had been kneeling and looked at the card. It was George Dallas's, and pencilled on it was, "May I see you?"

"Mr Dallas said he was very anxious to see

you," said Pincott, grudgingly, "but I could take your excuse if you like, Miss. I am sure you don't look fit to see any one; and as for packing, I am sure, you know, you've only to leave it to me, and proud I'll be to do it."

"I am always better when I am doing something, but you can finish now if you like," said Adair, with a faint smile, going towards the door. A night such as she had passed cannot but leave outward as well as inward traces. Crueller far than the first despairing frenzy of long-repressed love had been the moment when, that brief madness over, reason had spoken out, cold and clear. Douglas had been grateful, he had been kind, he was even sorry to bid good-bye to her, but he had not, by a single word, sought for her love, simply because he no longer desired it. They were both free: had he prized her love as once he did, he would have tried to win it back. Writhe under it as the heart which had kept faith might, she could come to no other conclusion, and every slow leaden hour that had passed had only forced it home all

the more pitilessly. She felt unfit enough to see any one, she thought, as she went downstairs, holding by the railing, but it would be ungracious to refuse to see Mr Dallas, and all the more as it might be a long time before she met him again.

Dallas was pacing restlessly up and down the forlorn fireless drawing-room.

"This is very dismal!" exclaimed Adair, looking from the grey blur of sky without to the empty grate.

"Never mind me, unless *you* feel it cold," said Dallas, hastily. "I know I have come at a most unreasonable hour, but I have just got back from Dalescourt, and I did not know whether I might still find you here. I—I wished to see you."

"You are only in time then," said Adair, sitting down, "for I am leaving for Earls-hope."

"I hope you mean to take a little rest, then. I am sure you need it. You are looking frightfully ill, Miss Earlstoun," looking anxiously at her. Her clear natural pallor

had faded to a dead bleached whiteness; the brown eyes looked *quenched* and sunken.

"Am I really? Do you consider that pleasant information, Mr Dallas?" said Adair, trying to smile.

"No, I don't; but I think it is high time you were taking more care of yourself, or that some one was doing it for you," somewhat bluntly.

"It has been rather a trying time," said Adair in a lowered voice, but with a sense that it was hardly truthful to shelter herself behind that pretext.

"It must have been," said Dallas. "I—I—believe me, I was deeply sorry to hear it. I knew it would be a grief to you, but it must be some comfort to think how much you were able to do; that you were such a help—such a"—blundering on with that feeling of utter helpless futility we all experience when we try, hidebound mortals that we are, to touch, however tenderly, the suffering of another.

"Thank you," said Adair hurriedly, feeling as if she were taking sympathy on false pre-

tences. Deep and true though that sorrow was, it was from a deeper and a sorer wound that her heart was bleeding now.

From her manner Dallas imagined that the subject was still too painful for her—that she would rather not talk of it. He began to speak in a somewhat disjointed way of his stay at Dalescourt, the place he had inherited from his uncle.

“It does not do to be too much of an absentee, but I have never learned to feel at home there somehow,” he said. “I fear I am growing a thorough Londoner—at least I know I was very glad to have such a good and sufficient reason as the opening of the House to bring me back to town.”

Most girls would have been conscious of “thunder in the air,” but Adair was for once too self-occupied to notice how unusual Dallas’s manner was, how oddly nervous and constrained, and how, in the midst of his rather perfunctory talk, he seemed always on the point of saying something which yet he had not courage to utter. He had returned

to town as soon as he could on hearing of Mrs Earlstoun's death, with the full determination that if he still found Adair there, as he hoped he might, he would in some way "put his fate to the touch." He would not let her pass away out of his life again. It had been hard to leave her some weeks before with the question still unsettled, but he had felt he dared not intrude his hopes or wishes into that struggle between life and death. Now her work was over—she was alone once more. He could wait no longer; but that putting of fate to the touch brings one face to face with the daunting alternative—

"To win or lose it all;"

and while the faintest possibility of the first seemed too dazzling a prospect, the consciousness that if he lost he would indeed lose all made him almost shrink from uttering the decisive words.

It had never occurred to Adair, however, when he had said pointedly that he wished to see her, that it was with any other object

than to seek her advice or assistance in some matter, as he had done often enough before, until all her thoughts and energies had been centred upon one sinking life. She began to think that he must be forgetting the object of his visit, and with a recollection of all she had still to do, she said at the first pause, "You wished to see me about something, I think? I am afraid if you want me to do anything, I cannot promise in the meantime. I do not intend to stay very long at Earlshope. Like you, I am becoming a Cockney too, I think," with a smile; "but I want to begin my own work again as soon as I can, and that does not leave me very much time, as you know. Still, I would like to help if I could."

Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth does not always speak, and with his opportunity thus unexpectedly made for him, Dallas still found himself unable to make use of it.

After all, it is not very easy to "stand and deliver" the depths of one's heart in answer to a point-blank question. Had she no other

association with him, then, than the work they had once or twice shared together? Could she conceive of nothing else he might wish from her than her assistance with some class or meeting? Apparently not yet, for her eyes met his quite frankly.

“You think of beginning nursing again? What will your friends say to that?” he said rather blankly. Still, if this were her plan, he had surely no rival to fear, at least,—and to the devout lover it always seems as if every one must be as smitten with his mistress’s charms as he is.

“Oh, they will think that seven other spirits, worse than the first, have entered into me,” said Adair, with a dreary little laugh. “Agnes, I have no doubt, will wash her hands of me altogether. I suppose it is utterly incomprehensible to her that any one who has tasted the ‘dear delights’ of a season should wish to go back to a hospital. If only I could persuade her that I found my patients much more interesting than my partners! I always intended beginning nursing again; indeed

there is nothing else for me to do," her voice, in spite of herself, falling away into a sigh.

Whether it were wise or not Dallas did not stop to think—he could refrain no longer. "Adair," he said abruptly, "I have been very patient. I have waited till your work here was done, but I can do so no longer. Let me care for you——"

"Oh, Mr Dallas, pray, pray don't! Oh, I am so sorry!" exclaimed Adair, face and voice expressing nothing but distressed consternation.

"I scarcely expected anything else," said Dallas in a low voice, his dark face paling; "but wait a little—do not answer me at once. Let me speak, Adair. You may think, perhaps, that I should say no more, but I cannot let the one hope of my life go at the first word. If you cannot give me love, I will not even ask it; but I entreat you to let me care for you now and always. Trust yourself to me, Adair, and I think I could make you happy. God knows that your happiness would at least be my first thought. I could

give you a fuller and a brighter life than the hard and lonely one you are planning for yourself. I love you so truly, so well, that I think I have love enough to serve for both—that I cannot but hope that you might learn to love me, even a little, in return. Can you trust me, Adair? I will ask no more than that now.” Voice and hands were trembling, the dark eyes fixed on her face were burning with eagerness, though his words were so quiet.

“Oh, Mr Dallas,” said Adair, in her distress unconsciously twisting her interlaced fingers, “I never dreamt of this. I thought—I thought that was all over, and that we were friends. I cannot tell you how grieved I am. If I could do what you wish, I would do it gladly, but I can’t. I do trust you, indeed I do. I am proud to have you as my friend, but that is not enough. You deserve all that a woman could give you—a whole heart in return for your own—and I can’t give you that,” her voice sinking.

“But I do not ask it. I am willing to take

what you can give me, however little it may be at first, and—and I do not think you will have cause to repent it. You may think it weak of me to plead thus, Adair; but I have loved you from the first day I saw you, even through all that bitter time when I thought if you remembered me at all it was only with scorn, and when I confess I had my own hard thoughts too. But my love lived through it all, and since I have seen you again——” His voice broke; he stopped abruptly, and looked at her in speechless entreaty. From her face he half hoped that she was relenting, and for a moment Adair was shaken. No woman, least of all one with a deep and tender heart, could listen unmoved to such humble earnest pleading. Could she not do it, she even asked herself? She knew now what loneliness was, what work was, and that it was no light thing to accept them for the rest of her life, and to turn away from the protecting tenderness, the safe and honoured shelter of a brave, strong man’s love, that was so fully, so generously given her. She was exhausted in mind and

body after her bitter all-night vigil ; had she strength for the future she was planning, she asked herself, with a conscious shrinking from its blank dreariness ? Mr Dallas asked so little, could she not give it him ? If she could never have what to her would have been the highest joy, might she not find content at least in making the happiness of another life ?—that strongest temptation of all to a true woman, and which accounts for many a marriage. Could she do it ? For one brief second the inward debate lasted, while Dallas breathlessly watched her face ; and then before her rose the dark wet street, and the solitary figure crossing the lamp-gleams on the pavement. Over heart and soul rushed again the sickening despairing anguish which had overwhelmed her when it had vanished. No, it was utterly impossible. She could not marry George Dallas with her heart so wholly given to her cousin. Whether he cared for it or not, the gift could never be taken back. Dallas's friend she might be, but his wife never. He might think now that a little would satisfy

him, but it would be cruel treachery to yield to him. Between her and those dark appealing eyes, the weary grey ones that last night had looked so sadly into her own would ever rise. In the full prosperous life that Dallas could give her, with a husband she could honour, admire, like—everything but love—her heart would ever be wandering to that distant land where its true owner might be. It was bitter to quench the hope that her silence was already kindling; her own suffering made her all the more pitiful for another's—but it must be done.

Oh, Mr Dallas, I can't—I can't—I can't!" her voice rising into a wail of pain.

Dallas rose and walked to the window, and stood looking out into the dull dripping street. A couple of caretakers stood at their respective doors, gossiping over the railings, while the wind fluttered their dingy skirts. Probably he saw nothing of it at the time, but afterwards that row of blank featureless houses with their shuttered windows, and those two

squalid frowsy figures, seemed photographed on his memory.

Presently he turned round, and coming nearer, said with some difficulty, speaking like one whose throat and tongue are parched, "Will you tell me one thing, and then I will trouble you no more? Is this because of—because of the wrong I did to—to one who is gone,—unwillingly indeed, but still the wrong was done? Could you—could you have cared for me if it had not been for that?"

"No," said Adair in a low voice, "it is not that. It is because I never had any love to give you; my whole heart was given away before I even saw you. I speak plainly, but"—her voice wavering—"you have been so generous to me, I think you have a right to know." Then at some breath of memory out of those fair early days her strength failed, and to her confusion and distress she burst into sudden passionate tears.

"For God's sake, don't, Adair!" exclaimed Dallas. "Forgive me for persecuting you as

I have done. I believe you would have given me what I asked if you could, and for that I thank you. Some day, when I can bear it, you will let me be your friend again."

Left alone, Adair, after a vain attempt to check her sobs, let them have vent, and shed such tears as she had never shed before. Love was gone from her life, and now friendship was taken too. Mr Dallas might talk of being her friend yet, but she knew it could not be, nor could she altogether wish it. Although it was impossible for her to have yielded to him—though to have done so would have been a sin against her whole nature—she was conscious that the void in heart and life, deep enough already, was all the drearier from the knowledge that she could never again look into that strong dark face, into those kind earnest eyes, with the frank unreserve of old.

Dallas had left the house, as fully convinced as though Adair had told him in so many words that it was her cousin whom she loved. Why this assurance should have come to him

so plainly and so clearly, he could hardly have told. The thought had occurred to him vaguely before, but now a hundred things confirmed it ; and bitter as this final frustration of all his hopes was, his anger was bitterer still. At such a moment it was impossible for him to be just, much less merciful, to Douglas Earlstoun. If to understand all is to forgive all, Dallas was even further from the first than from the second. He neither knew Douglas's circumstances nor his temptations, and even if he had, he was probably in no mood to make allowance for them. To his mind Douglas appeared simply to have allowed himself to sink, on account of one disappointment, into idle, aimless dissipation. From the want of heart or of sense to appreciate Adair, or from some lower instinct, he had chosen instead of her a woman like Cicely Charteris ; and now that he was free again, he seemed as far as ever from valuing the treasure still waiting for him. And it was for a man like that, that this pure and noble woman was keeping her heart,—it was

for him that Adair was letting the white flower of her life wither! It would have been hard enough to have seen that perfect blossom gathered by another, but to see it thus left unheeded was intolerable to the man who would fain have shielded it with his life.

"It would seem as if the best way to win and to keep a woman's heart was to trample on it," he burst out bitterly to himself, as he walked rapidly through the foggy deserted Park, into which he had gone, feeling he could neither stay in his rooms nor go anywhere where he might meet people.

For a little this sudden revelation had almost shaken his faith in Adair herself. No one was worthy of her, and he least of all; but could she be all that he had dreamed her if she could cling so long to one so unfit for her? But the old loyalty soon reasserted itself. "The fellow must have more good in him than I have credited him with, since she can care for him so," he grudgingly admitted at last. Poor Dallas! he had unconsciously

hoped more than he had admitted to himself, and this second disappointment was cruel indeed. In its first keen pangs, it was perhaps no wonder that he should be both unjust and ungenerous.

CHAPTER XV.

ABOUT a fortnight later, Dallas, on his way to the House, had turned into one of the minor picture exhibitions which afford such a merciful relief from the grey streets and the grating winds of March, in the glimpses they give of cloud - flecked hillsides, of breadths of blue wind-blown sea, or of some green woodland nook. Fortunately there are still painters willing to represent Nature as she is, not as she may appear to them,—to give a faithful and loving transcript, instead of some weird and uncanny “impression” of what might well be new heavens and a new earth, so unlike are they to anything in our familiar world. On a fine day, however, the pictures are a very secondary consideration; everybody is on the outlook

for notabilities or notorieties, or studying such spring costumes as may have been courageously donned in spite of winds and weather. Dallas, who had not lost his old artistic instincts, soon found that he was almost the only one who was paying the slightest attention to the ostensible object of the gathering. He had been asked by a friend to look at a picture by an unknown young artist, in the hope, probably, that he might prove a purchaser, but he was beginning to think that his chances of seeing it on that day at least were extremely small. Between him and it a couple had determinedly planted themselves—a tall girl in black, who was talking in a very demonstrative fashion with a young man, rather too well known by reputation to Dallas. Her voice struck him as familiar, though its high loud key jarred upon his ear; and as she turned slightly, he saw it was Clara Saldanha. He would have passed on with a bow, but she held out her hand, exclaiming, “Mr Dallas! you are the very person

I wanted to see. Now I hope you are going to tell me the truth."

"I hope I am in the habit of doing so, Mrs Saldanha. What cause have I given you to suspect me of doing anything else? What am I to tell you the truth about?"

"I want to know if it is really true that you and Adair are engaged. I can't ask her, for she is away at Earlshope, so you see I have to ask you. I am sure I don't know why there should be any mystery about it, and it is too bad that I shouldn't have been told, when everybody is speaking of it."

Dallas was not given to flushing, but a dark colour rose in his face. "Who is speaking of it, Mrs Saldanha?" he asked coldly.

"Oh, scores of people; but Douglas told me so only the other day, and I supposed he ought to know. He seemed to think it was all settled, at least."

"I shouldn't suppose that Earlstoun was given to flights of fancy; probably some more imaginative friend has told him so.

However, you can let him know, or any of the 'scores' you may meet, that there is no such good fortune in store for me, nor ever likely to be. I don't know who sets those absurd rumours afloat, but I am sure your cousin would be extremely annoyed if she knew that she was being talked of in this fashion; and if only for her sake, you will oblige me by contradicting this report whenever you can."

Clara pouted like a scolded child. "I am sure I never would have spoken of it, but Douglas was so certain about it. I am afraid I shall not be able to contradict it to him, at least, for I don't know when I may see him again, and really I have no time to write to anybody."

"Why, what has become of him? I thought he had newly come home."

"So he had, but he has become a perfect Wandering Jew lately. He has gone to America,—or if he has not gone, he is just going."

"America! What is taking him there?"

“Goodness knows!” said Clara, with equal elegance and indifference.

“Only for a trip, I suppose?” said Dallas, to whom Douglas’s movements had become of more interest than he chose to acknowledge.

“Oh no; he means to stay. He won’t be back for ever so long, I should think, judging from the solemn farewell he took of me, and the quantities of good advice as to not enjoying myself too much he gave me as a parting present. Don’t you hate good advice, Mr Dallas?”

“One is not bound to take it, Mrs Saldanha, and none of us do, I am afraid,” said Dallas, smiling.

He thought that the girl was not beyond the need of advice certainly when, a minute later, he heard her chattering society slang again at the top of her fresh young voice. He looked a little sadly at the round smiling face, overflowing with heedless high spirits, and contrasting oddly enough with the precocious worldly knowledge, real or assumed,

of her talk. That her brother should be uneasy at leaving her alone was scarcely to be wondered at, he thought.

“If Earlstoun chose to exile himself to the backwoods, it was no business of his; people might be supposed to know their own business best,” he said to himself, as he went on to the House; but all the same the question would return, Why was he going? During the long hours of a dreary endless debate on the enlivening subject of the importation of diseased cattle, the conviction was gradually gaining ground in his mind, as one honourable member prosed away after another, that in some way or other the report of his engagement to Adair was the cause of Douglas’s self-banishment. He laughed the idea to scorn; called himself a romantic fool, who imagined that every one was as infatuated as himself. Earlstoun probably wanted to retrench, and, like a wise man, was going where it would be easiest to do so: where was the need of constructing any rose-water story-book theory to account for it, then? But in

spite of himself the idea grew stronger, and then came the question that haunted him all night through,—Ought he to let Douglas Earlstoun go, under a misapprehension that might sever him and Adair for ever? A word now might make all the difference in two lives. Perhaps; but why should it be laid on him to speak it? What concern was it of his, after all? What grounds had he for this absurd notion beyond his own fancy? From what Adair had said, he had chosen to fancy that it was her cousin who was still standing between them; from Clara's information, he had equally chosen to fancy that Douglas was voluntarily resigning the field to him. He had not the slightest proof of the one or the other. Was it likely, said prejudice, that if Earlstoun had been deeply in earnest he would have been so scrupulous over his, Dallas's, possible claims? Dallas was inclined to think not. Then why on earth should he meddle with the matter? All night through and next day he stoutly resisted the importunate suggestion, till in

the afternoon he suddenly yielded to it,—to the extent, at least, of going to Douglas's clubs, to learn, if possible, whether he had really gone, or where he might still be heard of. At both he got the same information—that Mr Earlstoun was leaving the country for an indefinite time, and that any one inquiring for him was to be referred to his lawyers, Messrs Moncrieff and Forbes, in Edinburgh. He could telegraph to them, thought Dallas, taking the address.

“When was Mr Earlstoun last here?” he asked the porter.

“Yesterday morning, sir,” replied the man. “From what he said, I believe he was leaving for Liverpool, sir.”

From clubland Dallas went to Mrs Sal-danha's, only to be informed that she was out of town for the day. Going back to his rooms, he found the reply telegram from Edinburgh waiting him—Mr Earlstoun was sailing by the *Etruria* next day from Liverpool.

Without giving himself more time for con-

sideration, Dallas drove to Euston and took the night train to Liverpool. What was his love for Adair worth, he asked himself in a sudden revulsion of feeling, if he would make no sacrifice for it?—her face rising up before him, and the sad but steadfast eyes with which she had looked at him when she had made that final confession. Why should he have weighed paltry personal considerations against the merest possibility of securing her happiness? Whatever else might be imagination on his part, at least he could not doubt that, for good or ill, it was her cousin whom she loved. Why had he let so much time pass? Already he might be too late; and though a word or a hint might stay Douglas now, it would be a very different matter if once he were fairly across the sea. The rush of the express through the gusty blackness of the March night was all too slow for his impatience. But long before the carriage-lamps began to pale before the first streaks of the windy dawn, the hot fit began to give place again to the old chill doubts.

Was he not a quixotic fool after all, so rashly to interfere in such a delicate matter? How did he know what had really parted the cousins? Would Adair thank him for thus forcing her on an indifferent suitor, if a suitor at all?—an aspect of the case which made his face burn. Supposing he did find Douglas, which might not be easy, unless he awaited him at the tender, how did he propose to explain the matter to him?

“Because I proposed to your cousin lately and she refused me, and because I heard from your sister that you are going to America, I have concluded that you are doing so because you think that I am about to marry Miss Earlstoun, so I have come to inform you that such is not the case.” Could absurdity go further? What sort of statement could he make that would not seem utterly preposterous with Douglas Earlstoun looking at him with those cold, jaded, grey eyes of his? Fortunately the compartment was empty, for Dallas laughed aloud at the picture—a laugh half savage, half rueful.

All this was merely on the surface, however. Beneath it the real struggle was going on, and had been ever since the question as to his duty had first forced itself on him. It was not the outward difficulties of the task he had undertaken which had caused his delay, nor was it they which were his chief persecutors now. Keenly alive as he was to the ridiculous side of his position, he tried to fancy himself wholly occupied with it, and to ignore the inward voice which was growing ever fiercer and more urgent as morning came on, and the growing light revealed the sky strewn with broken scattered clouds, like the wreckage from the gale that was decreasing in force as the day advanced. While in self-mockery he was constructing all sorts of whimsical imaginary conversations with Douglas Earlstoun, that voice kept repeating, Why should you do this thing? Why should you destroy every hope and prospect of happiness for yourself? Why should you try to bring Douglas back,—you are in no way bound to do it? He has had his chance

and has lost it, or has not chosen to take it, —what is it either way to you? Adair is not the first woman who has loved loyally and devotedly and has lost, and yet has learned to love again. You chose your time badly. You had waited so long, why did you spoil all by speaking at a time when every tender memory was aroused, and all the past brought to life again? Douglas once fairly passed out of her world, and nothing left but the old dreary round, she may listen to you ere long. You know that there will never be another woman like Adair to you—that you prize a look or a word from her more than all the love you might gain from some one less hard to win. Why throw away your last chance?

It might seem but a poor temptation with which to bribe honour and conscience, but even a possibility is much to a love that has lived almost without hope for years, and a chance, however faint it may be, is hard to part with when it *is* the last. As the flat shores of the Mersey began to appear Dallas found himself slipping into dreams, all the

more delicious, if vague, from the weariness that was at last stealing over him—dreams that refused to be dispelled by the “retro Sathanas!” more and more drowsily uttered.

Among the many popular copy-book fallacies fondly cherished in spite of all experience, one of the most aggravating is that troubles will appear less in the morning than they did over-night, and that in general the morning is the time for quick thought, for bracing resolve, and for the active and resolute facing of all the ills of the day. On the contrary, did any midnight ever bring such dismal repentance as morning can do? Do troubles ever loom larger than in those early hours when “the blood is low,” and the shrinking spirit feels that respite is over, and that, ready or unready, fit or unfit, it must gird itself up and go forth to battle? When to this state of mind—which, in spite of the copy-books, we venture to think is the average one—there is added the demoralising effects of a sleepless night-journey, it was perhaps little wonder that Dallas, on arriving in

Liverpool, should feel less and less enamoured of his fool's errand, as he called it. He would discharge it, however; of that, in spite of the night's debate, there had never been any real question. If Douglas Earlstoun were still in England, he would find him and let him know the truth somehow, but he was conscious he would do it neither willingly nor graciously. It had to be done, and it would be done; to more he would not pretend. Always susceptible to outward influences, his surroundings did not tend to lessen his sense of flat depression,—the great sweep of leaden water overhung by the sea fog, through which the low shores and the vast black hulls of the great liners loomed indistinctly. Which was the *Etruria*, he wondered, as he went to the shipping office first, to inquire the time of her sailing.

His resolve was destined to be tested sooner than he had expected, for, coming out of the office, the first person he encountered was Douglas, who stared at him in surprise.

“Why, Dallas, what on earth are you doing

here? You don't mean to cross the ferry, too, surely? I suppose people live and move and have their being in an ordinary way in Liverpool, as they do anywhere else, but one feels as if no one came here for any reason except to go somewhere else."

Dallas scarcely knew what excuse he made. Now that he was thus so soon and so unexpectedly relieved of the initial difficulty of finding Douglas, he began, with the usual contrariety of human nature, to wish that the inevitable moment could have been delayed a little.

"If you are not desperately busy, come along to my hotel and help me to keep off the blues for the next two hours," said Douglas, as they emerged into the sloppy street again. "I never considered myself sentimental, but, rather to my surprise, I find myself getting into a sort of 'Emigrant's Farewell' and 'My native land, Good-night' frame of mind, and all the other appropriate emotions. I remember when I went to India I set off as jolly as could be, thinking of noth-

ing but my new red coat and all the wonderful things I was to do ; but ten years are rather apt to alter one's views of the world and of one's capacity for doing anything, not to speak of wonders."

Under ordinary circumstances, Dallas was probably the last person Douglas would have cared to meet ; but on the threshold of a new life, where every face would be that of a stranger, this unlooked-for sight of a well-known one awoke something of the old cordiality that had subsisted between them. Dallas was surprised by it, and a little touched, with a remorseful recollection of some of his fancies on the way down in the train. He was struck by the change in Douglas's appearance, as even little Evelyn had been ; but if there were more "scores," as she had called them, on his face, it had less of that look of dreary lack-lustre indifference which of late years Dallas had always associated with it.

Dallas assented readily enough to accompany him. After all, the street was scarcely

the best place for the communication he had to make ; but established presently in a comfortable smoking-room, with all the soothing and confidential influence of a good cigar, it seemed somehow no easier to begin. They talked in a desultory fashion of all sorts of indifferent subjects, with that paralysing consciousness, always more or less distinct on the eve of departure, that a certain amount of time must be filled up somehow, till at last the start comes almost as a relief. Then they spoke of Douglas's journey, and his plans, so far as he cared to talk of them. With a sense of desperation, Dallas felt that the minutes were dropping away, and yet it seemed impossible to bring the talk round to Adair, or in any way to introduce the subject without dragging it in head and shoulders, as he should have to do ere long.

Presently, with a word of apology, Douglas looked his watch, and rose.

"Must you go?" said Dallas, rising too, with a feeling of now or never.

"By-and-by, lots of time yet. I have

nothing to do but get on board—my traps are away, and, thank heaven ! I have no good-byes to say.”

“You seem to have taken very few, certainly. If it had not been for a chance meeting with Mrs Saldanha, I for one should never have known that you were going. Did you treat all your friends in that fashion ? Miss Earlstoun even did not seem to know—at least, she never mentioned it when I saw her last.”

Douglas looked sharply round at him, a sudden steely flash in his grey eyes.

“I am not surprised at that ; you and she would have much more interesting subjects to talk of than me and my concerns, I should think,” he said coldly ; and then, with an evident effort, “You remind me of my duty, however—I have been very remiss. I ought to have congratulated you, but I am not good at those formalities, so please imagine all the necessary things said.”

“I don’t know why you should congratulate me.”

“Why ? I should think the man who has

won my cousin Adair the luckiest in the world, and very much to be congratulated—that is why,” with some bitterness.

“I quite agree with you,” said Dallas steadily, but looking away a little; “but then I am not that fortunate man, nor am I ever likely to be.”

“Look here, Dallas; tell me plainly what this means. I was told positively, so that I could not doubt it, that you were engaged to my cousin; that you would have been married before now, but that in her goodness she would not leave my—my mother sooner.”

“I thought I had spoken plainly enough, but if you wish for more, I shall tell you what I don’t suppose I would tell any other one,” with a dry little laugh, “that I’ve had my chance and lost it, and that there never was, and never will be, the least possibility of what you have heard, from whom I don’t know, ever happening.”

There was a little pause: they were alone in the big room,—Douglas turned and walked

hastily to the other end. Dallas, who was leaning on the mantelpiece, stared at the blazing fire. This open acknowledgment of the defeat of all his hopes brought the full bitterness surging back again. Good God! what a different future was before Earlstoun, if he chose to take it, and of that Dallas had not much doubt now. Still, that it was he who had rendered that future possible did not at the moment cause him any special satisfaction. A man who has done the right at a heavy cost to himself is not the one to plume himself upon it, and Dallas only felt how hard, how cruelly hard, it had been.

“Dallas!” said Douglas in a changed voice, coming up and putting his hand on his shoulder. On his face there was a curious mingled expression. “Tell me—is it possible—did you come here to tell me this?—do you know what it means to me?” hoarsely.

Dallas looked as confused as if he had been detected in some meanness. “I—I thought you ought to know. I thought there was some mistake, when I heard that

you were going away," he stammered, trying vainly to speak in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I shall not go with the *Etruria*,—I shall wait till the next steamer at least," said Douglas, attempting to do the same. However deeply two Englishmen's emotions may be stirred, their first instinct is to conceal it as far as possible from each other, but for once it refused to be hidden.

"You have given me a chance, at least,—a possibility,—a new life it may be," said Douglas, brokenly. "You have done for me what I believe no other man would have done, Dallas," taking a few hasty steps away, and then turning back again. "You know where I shall go at once. I—I don't know what she may say to me, but if—if—however it may be, God knows it is you who are worthy of her, and not I!"

"Don't say any more about it, Earlstoun, like a good fellow. I would wish you joy if I could," said Dallas, with the ghost of a smile, and the two men wrung each other's hand in silence.

CHAPTER XVI.

"I WISH I saw you getting a little more colour, Adair. You don't look to me a bit better than when you came a fortnight ago, and really I have hardly got over the shock your appearance gave me then."

"But I never had any colour, mother."

"Oh, well, I don't say that you ever had a complexion like Aggie, or like what I had when I was her age, but that's a very different matter from being as white as chalk, as you are now. I hoped the good fresh air after that stuffy house would have done you some good, but really I don't see any difference," fretfully.

"Perhaps it is the black gown," said Agnes, critically. "Black is very trying to some people. Luckily for me, I can wear any-

thing, and black is never unbecoming to very fair people," with a smile into the nearest mirror; "but I hate to be *obliged* to wear it, and, thank goodness! we can bundle all our black things away before we go back to town. Three months is quite long enough for an aunt. You must begin to pick up in earnest, Adair, or you can't expect to repeat your successes of last season."

"I have no wish to do so," indifferently.

"Oh, nonsense! You are tired out just now, but wait till we get back to town," said Agnes.

"That is just what I complain of; but you may do what you please for selfish people, and you can never do enough. I cannot understand how your aunt could allow you to slave as you did."

"Please, don't, mother. Don't blame *her*—I can't bear it," said Adair imploringly, her eyes filling, her lips quivering piteously, in spite of an evident effort to compress them.

"I don't blame her more than the others,

but they are all alike. No one, of course, expects anything from Clara ; she is a flighty fool, and will give her husband trouble some day unless he looks more after her. But to hear Isabel talk, one would think they had done you some great favour by letting you stay in Park Street, while all the time you were saving them a nurse, and doing the work of two. And Douglas is not a bit better. To think he would not even take the trouble to come over from Middleton to say good-bye to us. Not that *I* had any special wish to see him—indeed, after all one has heard, I question if one would wish to associate much with him now ; but it would only have been a mark of proper respect. After all, it is perhaps the best thing he can do to take himself off to America, though what he means to do there I don't know. Make his fortune ?” with a sneering little laugh.

“ I am afraid I am uncharitable enough to wish that he may not. There is no great likelihood of it—I fancy he will always be

better at spending than getting—for then he might be induced to let us have Earlshope. I hate to feel that it is only ours on sufferance. He ought to sell it, for I am sure he will never be able to live in it. It would be so delightful to think that it would all be baby's some day; and if it were ours, I don't see why we should not call ourselves the Mitchell-Earlstouns. It would not sound at all badly, and plenty of men take their wives' names along with their own. I am certain Mr Mitchell would not object, for, as it is, he wants baby called Earlstoun instead of Charlie. What do you think, Adair? Mammy is all for Charlie, naturally; but then I tell her anybody might be Charlie Mitchell, but Earlstoun is quite different. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," said Adair vaguely, hardly knowing to what she was assenting; "but is it not time the young man was here in person? surely Mrs Ward is late." Even the rites and ceremonies with which the household god was daily worshipped would be better

than this, she thought, looking out into the fountain-garden, where regiments of crocuses were drawn up in battalions, gold, and purple, and white. A ray of sunshine struck the water, turning it into a jet of leaping light; far away up, above the brown ragged fringe of larches, the ribbon of sky was the keenest, clearest blue. Agnes had chosen what had formerly been her aunt's morning-room as her own, but, save that Maurice's cold handsome face no longer looked down from above the mantelpiece, the room was very little changed. Adair often fancied that she ought to see her aunt's graceful figure at her writing-table, as in the days when she used to be summoned across from the Old Manse. Sore and heavy as her heart was, the constant little stabs at those who were dead, or dead to her, were often more than she could bear; and from the mistaken impression that she might thereby further Mr Dallas's cause, Mrs Earlstoun was unceasing and unsparing in her denunciations of Douglas. In her eyes he could do no right since he had failed to

make that formal farewell visit, for a reason she could not divine.

Adair's respite lasted while Mrs Ward, accompanied by a nursery satellite, bustled in, and replied with voluble explanations to such remonstrances as Agnes ventured to address to such a potentate. Adair had to confess, ruefully, that she was not specially attracted to her nephew, and that her share in the chorus of praise only attained sufficient fervour by some sacrifice of sincerity. The prospective head of the house of Mitchell-Earlstoun was a tiny fragile creature, with a likeness to his father which was almost ludicrous, and which was increased by that look of wizened age which some feeble infants have. If his little bald head had only been polished and shining, instead of being very red and wrinkled, Adair thought the resemblance would have been complete. In her eyes he seemed hardly a fit successor to all the "fair women and brave men" who had peopled Earlschope for so long; but the father and mother—for Mr Mitchell had already

joined the group—regarded the white bundle with nothing short of rapture.

“Really,” said Agnes, seriously, “I do think baby gets heavier every day. Come and try, Adair—you have not had him for two days ; I am sure you will feel a difference.”

Adair came obediently, trying not to smile, but to Agnes’s unspeakable delight the child set up a faint little wail at the attempted transfer. “Did he know his own mother then, the precious sweet? No, no ; he won’t be sent away from her then,” bestowing a shower of butterfly kisses on the wee puckered face, and the morsels of hands protruding from the mass of lace and embroidery.

“There! is not that a proof of what I always say, that he has far more *mind* already than your big, heavy, overgrown children,” she exclaimed, looking round triumphantly. “Look at Isabel’s now ; although he is so much older than baby, he doesn’t seem to know one person from another, or if he knows, he doesn’t care, for you can hand him about just like a sack of flour—and I am sure he is

like one, fat overgrown thing that he is. I am certain Isabel must have been just such another placid white lump when she was a baby. I always think there is something gross about those very big children."

With her little fair face flushed with earnestness, Agnes looked very pretty in her tea-gown of softest white surah silk, with a knot or two of black ribbon representing her supposed state of "mourning." Her elderly spouse, round whose knuckly forefinger one of the tiny grasping hands had chanced to clench itself, sat by, "My cup runneth over" writ large on his beaming countenance. Mrs Earlstoun was ready, like a Greek chorus, to fill up any pause. Adair felt she was no longer needed, and stole out into the sunshine.

She took the path which till to-day she had avoided, that only too familiar one which led through the leafless woods to the foot-bridge. She walked steadily on, without pausing even on the bridge, to the high narrow gate in the wall opening into the Old Manse garden. The gate was unlocked, but from disuse the hinges

had grown so stiff that she had to exert all her strength before it suddenly yielded with a harsh grating sound. Within, the clear white spring sunshine was falling broad and strong on the long low house-front, on the narrow windows encircled by the skeleton arms of the bare creepers. Adair had no wish to go inside. She did not need to do so : before her mind rose up a picture of every one of those low-ceiled rooms. She could have told the position of all the homely old furniture ; she saw every patch or threadbare piece on the worn carpets, every crack or stain on wall or ceiling. Out here in the spring sunshine and the fresh spring wind there were ghosts enough—those ghosts which this materialistic age can neither ignore nor exorcise—our old hopes, our vanished joys, our dead selves : no need to go within to seek for more. She walked slowly down the path, feeling every moment as if she must see Elfie's languid slender figure, or Saunders with his bowed but vigorous old frame appearing through the arch in the beech-hedge, still

laden with last year's brown leaves, and ragged from want of clipping. A neglected garden is a depressing place enough, when there are no deeper memories associated with it than the flowers that have disappeared from the bare sodden beds. Here, however, every nook and corner held some piece of her old life; every green shoot forcing its way up recalled those light-hearted days when it was joy enough to know that the winter was over and gone, and when every sign of coming spring was hailed as a new delight. The little involuntary smile which had curved Adair's lips when she had left Earlshope had long vanished; and the look of spiritless dejection into which her features relaxed whenever she was alone, deepened as she walked down to the Water-side, the mossy gnarled branches of the old orchard trees casting uncouth twisted shadows on the tussocks of coarse bleached grass at her feet. After a moment she sat down, and, drawing a letter from her pocket, read it slowly through again, though it was but short, and she knew its contents

well enough already. It was from Dr Harding, telling her that the authorities of St Matthew's had been asked to recommend a matron for a new hospital at Wolverhampton, and asking whether she would undertake the position. That was her future, and she had come to-day to her old home to bid good-bye to the past. From henceforth she must be sufficient for herself: love was gone from her, home she had none—for what place was there for her in that smiling, satisfied, little group she had just left? She could not go through deeper waters than she had passed already, she said to herself; but then the very sharpness of her pain had given her a strange fierce strength to grapple with her lot: now she felt nothing but a heavy, weary heart-sinking as she tried to face her new life.

From sheer lack of courage to front the storm she knew it would raise, she had not yet told her mother and sister of her refusal of George Dallas, nor of her intentions for the future. Utterly unstrung as she was in mind and body, she shrank from

the fretful upbraidings, the complaints, the jeers, that the disclosure would bring on her, and the consciousness of this weakness filled her with shame and alarm. She, usually so strong and self-reliant, could not now command face or voice when her mother or Agnes would level some little taunt at Douglas, or at the unanswering dead. As she read her letter again, slow bitter tears welled up in her eyes till the paper became a blank, and the glancing waters of the Rule a mere shining blur. She tried to check them, but she seemed to have no strength to restrain them, and at last let them have their way.

“I am not fit for it, I am not fit for anything now, and yet I can’t—I can’t stay here. What am I to do? oh, what am I to do?” she said piteously to herself, as one great drop after another rolled down the white cheeks at which her mother was fretting, and fell with a splash on the paper. Some tears may ease the heart, but not such as these. Shaken and weary, feeling as if some actual load were weighing down heart and

limbs, Adair rose at last and went slowly up the garden again. If she stayed longer she would only expose herself to a volley of questions,—“at which, in my present idiotic state, I would probably burst out crying,” she said bitterly to herself. To-night she would write to Dr Harding: once away from every sight or sound that could awaken memory, she could surely battle better with this strange weakness. As for what her mother and Agnes might say—well, it would not be pleasant, but she supposed she would survive it; she had lived through worse before. The sun was gone from the house front; it looked blank and cold enough as she took one last look round. The jarring scroop with which the gate closed behind her echoed through the stillness.

Crossing the bridge again, she paused, partly from the old instinct. She had been saying good-bye to her old life,—why not to this spot, which held the very core of those memories that after to-day she must put away for ever? To-morrow she would be

the matron-elect of Wolverhampton hospital; for the rest of her life she would give out stores, and look after lint and bandages. By-and-by perhaps she would be able to centre all her ambition on the model state of her wards, and on turning out the best trained nurses, but surely she might spare this last hour to the past. Memory once set free, what thronging visions came in long procession out of the years. Those dim childish days awoke again, when she had shared in all the romps of "the boys," and Douglas had been her ally and protector from Maurice's heedless ways or deliberate mischief. Once more she lived through that morning hour when for a brief moment, in what seemed the absolute fulfilment of every hope, she had been exalted to heaven, only in the next to be thrust down to hell, as she said bitterly enough to herself. At least she had not given her all wholly for nothing; if his love had not lived like hers, Douglas had loved her then. The evening air seemed to thrill again with that passion-charged cry, "Adair,

I love you, I love you!" whose echoes could never wholly die out of heart and memory. Was there ever a time in all her life when, consciously or unconsciously, Douglas had not been the centre of her thoughts? Could she banish him from them even yet, though he was utterly gone out of her life, and had willingly left her behind him? Perhaps she ought to do so; it might be weak, it might be unwomanly, but her love was given, and it was beyond her power to recall it. After all, has not all true human love its root in the divine?—some kinship in its unchanging steadfastness with Him whose name is Love, who remaineth faithful, who cannot deny Himself.

The sky was all alight with the delicate silvery radiance of a spring sunset; from off the snow-flecked hills the breeze swept down keen and fresh. Against the pale stainless blue was outlined the fretwork of leafless boughs, though the swelling knobs of the unfolded buds told of the new life ready to break forth. Swinging out clear against the

sky on a slender swaying twig, a thrush was pouring out its sweet saucy notes. For a moment the evening peace, the penetrating rapture of the bird-voice, won her from her thoughts. Adair looked from the rippling water to the illumined sky, overarching the familiar hills, with a sense of something lacking.

“Are they still such as once they were,
Or is the dreary change in me?”—

she might have asked, missing the responsive thrill that such a sight would have awakened of old. Then the evening glow on sky and hills vanished, the rippling music beneath her feet changed to the seething swell of Atlantic waves, through which a mighty ship was tearing its way westward, going ever farther and farther from her into that far sunset, whose calm brightness was mocking her weary heart and eyes.

Footsteps sounded on the bridge. She turned away her head. It could be no one but some home-going labourer—the bridge was little used now since the Old Manse was

empty ; but even to such she did not care to expose her white face and heavy eyes. Neither could she trust her voice to exchange the customary "Fine night"—the greeting expected by man, woman, and child on the Rule Water. But instead of passing on, the steps paused.

"Is it here where we meet again, Adair?" said a voice harsh with suppressed emotion.

Adair looked round with a gasping cry, and then stood stricken dumb. For a second she actually thought that the very intensity of her longing had given bodily shape to her desires.

"Adair," said Douglas, without taking time to explain his sudden appearance or to soothe her startled surprise, "do you know why I went away? Because I thought you had chosen a better man than I. It would have been just and right if you had, but I could not bear to stay and see it; and I should have been far enough away now, if Dallas—God bless him for it!—had not come and told me the truth. You have but to bid me now,

and I will go; but I could not go till I had heard from yourself whether that love you once gave me was wholly dead and gone, as well it might be, or whether there may be still a little left for me—even a little, Adair. You have sent away a far better man than I, but far above me as he is in every other way, he cannot—no man could—love you better than I. My love has grown with my life; it has kept alive any good there is left in me; it will live with me for ever, though you send me from you—though I never see you again. Oh, Adair! can it be—is it possible?” breaking off in a sort of amazement.

Adair could not speak—she hardly even heard him. In the sudden revulsion from hopeless despondency, all she realised was that Douglas was beside her, that he loved her still,—that the weary years of separation, of estrangement, were over and gone. She made a slight tremulous movement towards him, uttering a little inarticulate cry, like some strayed frightened child that, amid a crowd of strangers, sees a well-known face. Douglas

caught her to him, and she lay still in his arms, conscious of nothing but a sense of utter peace and rest. He stood for a moment in awestricken silence, trembling from head to foot. A sudden wave from the past rushed over him again—that bitter moment when on this very spot he had stood before her dumb under the scourge of his shame, all the suffering he had caused her, the loneliness of all those long years—and it was thus she repaid him !

He loosened his hold, and gently put her a little away from him. “Adair,” he said, “think a moment, dear—it is not too late. I have been thinking only of myself; I have taken you at unawares. Can this be true? do you mean it, love? Oh, Adair! I was never worthy of you,—I am far less so now. I am not fit to kiss the dust off your feet, far less to hold you in my arms, after what I have made you endure. What right have I to speak of love, or to ask for more than pardon? and yet I think if you can forgive all the wrong I did you, it can only be because you

still love me a little. Will you take me, Adair, such as I am, and make me worthy of a love like yours? Can you forget all the past, except that at my worst and lowest I never ceased to love you, and to look up to you as some wretch in torment might to a throned saint? Oh, Adair! am I forgiven? is it true?"

"Douglas," said Adair, in a low but steady voice, her brown eyes shining as she lifted them bravely to his face, "do you remember what I said to you once? I say it again—I can say nothing more, but it is far, far truer now than it was then." Then in a whisper, while the bright blood chased the pallor from cheek and throat: "I love you, Douglas,—that includes all!"

THE END.

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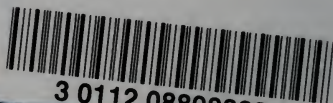
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